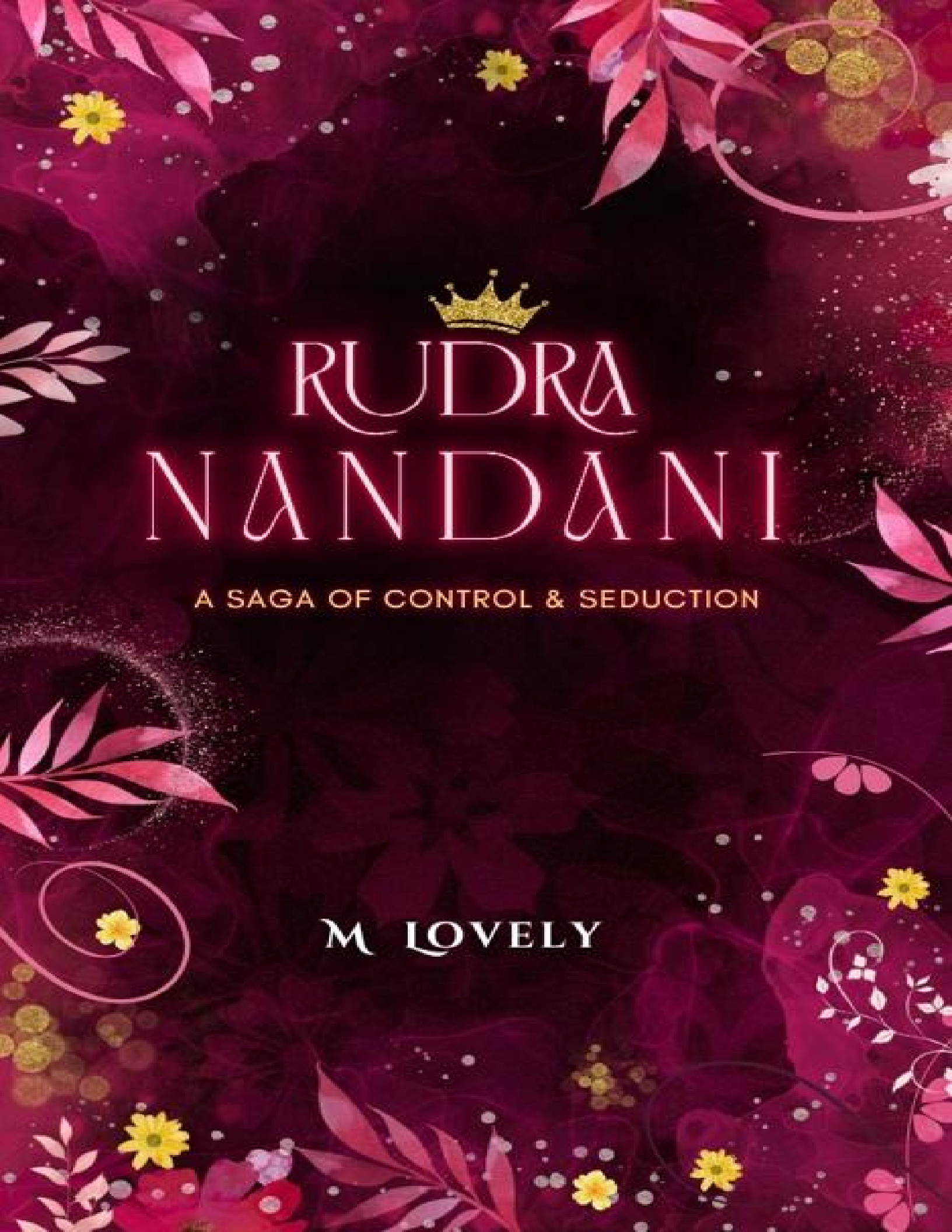
RUDRA
NANDANI
A SAGA OF CONTROL & SEDUCTION
M LOVELY

Rudra Nandani

A Saga of Control and Seduction

M Lovely

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To Every Girl Who Makes A King.

Then Makes Him Beg.

Content Warnings!

Explicit Sexual Content

Dubious Consent & Emotional Manipulation

Power Imbalance & Age Difference

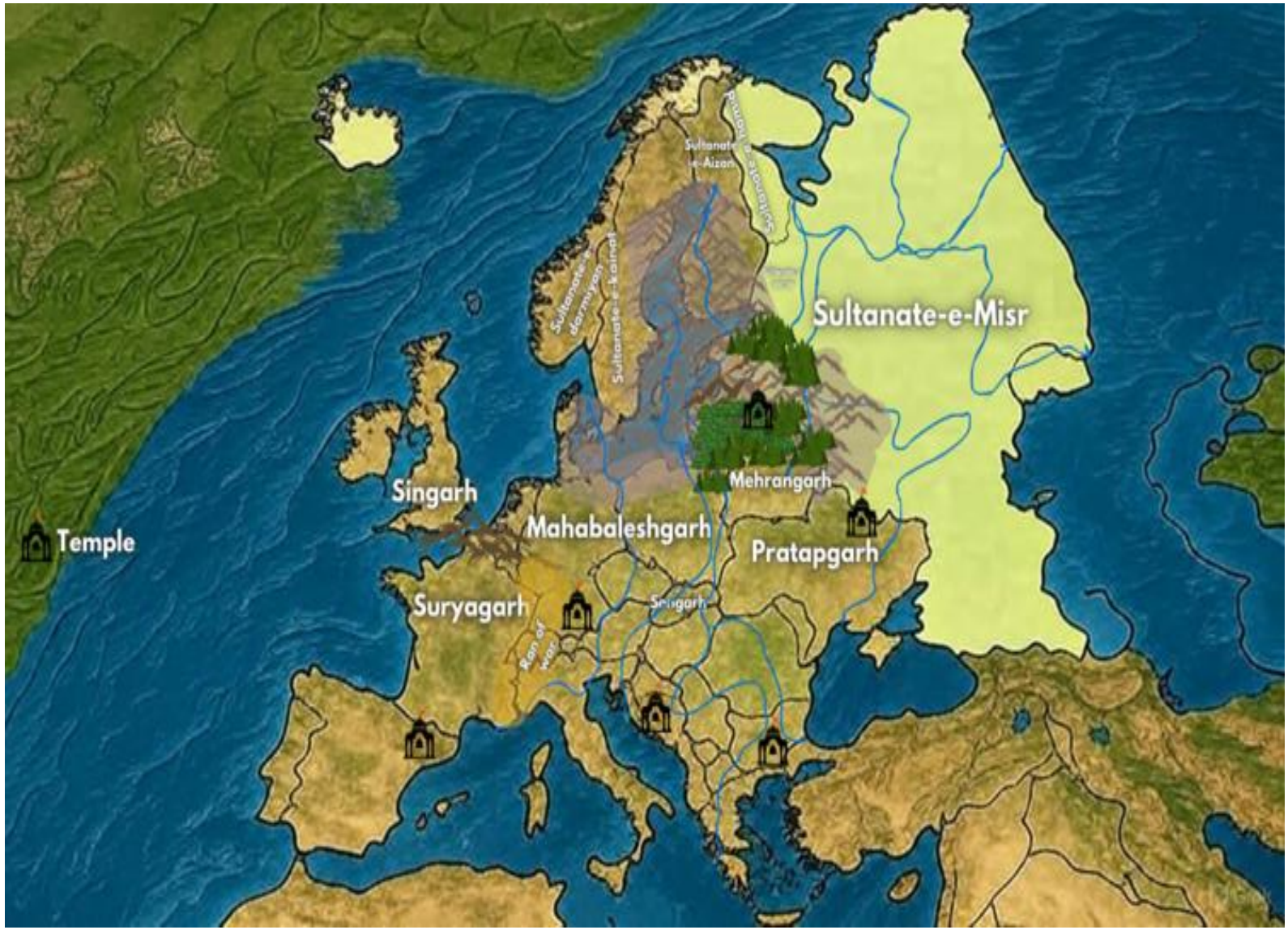
Verbal Aggression & Threats

Emotional Trauma & Betrayal

Mild Violence & Physical Restraint

Traditional Gender & Cultural Norms

Graphic Depictions of Desire, Longing, and Shame


Sultanate-e-Misr
Mehrangarh
Singarh
Mahabaleshgarh
Pratapgarh
Suryagarh
Temple

Prologue

Rudra was the love of my life, and I was his, until I discovered that everything was just a game.

Emotions and blood share an eternal link, where the vehemence of emotions flows as thickly as blood through our veins.

Mine was love—eternal, everlasting love—and his was revenge—deadly, ghastly revenge.

The two months during which I was acquainted with every ounce of his affection were the most heavenly of my life.

I was drenched—completely soaked in the ocean of his love to the extent that I devoted myself entirely to him. In a way, the title of Princess, daughter of King Rajvardhan and Queen Abhishree, and pride of Mahabalesgarh didn't matter to me.

I offered every piece of myself to him on that particular night. His love had me surrendered to the point that I forgot marrying him would be deemed a sin in the eyes of the people.

The night was long, eventful, and exhausting, and I realized by the state I found myself in the morning—stripped bare, broken like my bangles, and my hair disheveled like the bed.

And I wasn't the only witness in the room. The whole empire knew what had happened between him and me. My family was thunderstruck, and I was devastated to find his absence and only a letter the next day.

"A scar your family gave to mine, and a scar I give back to yours."

I was shaken to the very soul. Everything was just a quest for revenge.

I was flooded with tears for weeks. I couldn't believe I had done that. How could I have let myself delve so deeply into him that I didn't think, even once, about my family and its esteem?

He ruined me, my life, and my family's honor.

Women are treated as delicate flowers when it comes to a family's pride, and he simply set it aflame in the name of vengeance.

But this wasn't the end. Not for me. I decided to extend the invitation for my *Swayamvar* to the King of Suryagarh, his uncle—an eighty-year-old man in search of a young bride for an heir to the throne, and to taste his food.

The revenge that burns for Rudra.

Nandani

“P

rincess!” I lifted my gaze from the spices to the heaving Suman. “He has arrived,” she said, gasping for breath.

My eyes widened. “Really?” I asked, a broad smile erupting on my face.

She nodded.

Rising from the stool, I brushed the spilt turmeric off my clothes, while hurrying out of the kitchen. I had been helping the cooks prepare lunch.

“Princess! You should at least change before meeting him,” Suman yelled, running after me, trying to keep up with my pace.

“I'd rather not,” I huffed, running down the corridors, caring less about the spices’ stains on my clothes.

Two years… I waited two years for this moment. I wrote hundreds of letters, but he answered none. He must have been angry about some of my mistakes when he left, but I couldn’t figure out what they were.

Suddenly, I collided with my Daadisa[1]. “Ah… Daadisa[1],”

“Nandani!” she chided. I looked at her nervously, nailed to the ground. “Where are you running?” She asked.

I averted my eyes, looking here and there to devise an excuse—fast and convincing. “Umm…. To watch pigeons,”

Her gaze scrutinised my form, and I uneasily shifted from one foot to another.

“Where’s your footwear?” she asked, and my eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets as I lifted my lehenga[2] and realised that I had been running barefoot this entire time.

“Um I… I do not recall where…they went,” I blurted, gesturing animatedly with my hands in a hurry.

She frowned at me suspiciously and asked, “Where they went? Do they wander off by themselves like you? You must have left them somewhere,”

I truly didn’t know where I had left them. My focus was solely on reaching the top floor to see my man return to the Empire.

“Nandani,” she pulled my ear, making me crinkle my brows in pain.

“My shoes??? Umm…. I am fasting today,” I managed to say.

“Fasting?” She gave me an incredulous look and reminded me, “You had breakfast with me in my chamber earlier.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, writhing to get my ear off her hold. “Half-day fasting, Daadisa! Now, please leave me. My pigeons are waiting.” I pleaded and ran past her towards the palace's main building. She laughed behind my back.

Once I reached the rooftop, I leaned over the stone baluster, breathing raggedly. Loose tresses from my braided hair danced across my face, and the dupatta[3] on my shoulder waved in the gusty winds as I set my eyes on the main entrance, my heart pounding in anticipation.

The far-off view made me squint.

And I felt it—the faint vibration of the heavy entrance doors opening.

My heart raced wildly in my chest, and my breathing became shallow for a good few moments when I noticed a man mounted on a brown horse with white marks on its legs.

Rudra!

An ear-to-ear smile etched on my face. I immediately scurried from there, fisting my lehenga, with Suman following suit. The sound of my anklets echoed through the hallways of the giant building as I was descending.

As we approached the royal garden, I slowed down and took leisurely steps because my mother's chamber was nearby, and I didn't want to catch her attention.

Once I arrived, I tiptoed toward the guest chambers. Since we weren't having any guests for the time being, the chambers were empty, and no one was there to witness me lurking.

At the end of one of the guest chambers where Rudra stayed during his last visit, I quietly hid behind a pillar and moved toward an open window.

"You may leave now, and if anyone asks for me, tell them I'm in my chamber," I instructed Suman. She nodded and left.

Holding my breath, I leaped into the empty chamber and hid behind the curtains in a corner.

After what felt like an eternity, my ears perked at the sound of doors opening.

I could hear his footsteps along with those of others, likely the attendants assisting him with unpacking. Craning my neck, I peeked in and saw his back.

His shoulders had broadened, and his physique had become even stiffer and more attractive. *Has he changed his diet?*

"Krupaya karke ye sab yahaan rakh dijiye," (Keep everything here, please.) He requested the attendants.

My stomach tickled with thousands of butterflies as I heard his voice after ages. I couldn't help but smile so wide that my cheeks hurt.

"Rehne dijiye, hum kar lenge," (It's alright; I'll do it.) He informed them, and the sound of their departure from the chamber followed.

When I heard the door shut, I peeped in his direction, and suddenly, he said, ***"Baahar aa sakti hain ab aap,"*** (You can come out now.)

I shivered at his voice and lost my balance.

"Aahhhh…" I shrieked in pain.

He laughed at me, and seeing him laugh so heartily made me forget my pain, so I laughed along.

He stepped closer, offering his hand to help me. I grasped it to rise, and the moment my palm came into contact with his, I felt a surge of emotion. It was rough and much larger than mine.

He pulled me up, bumping me into his chest. I looked up at him, locking my intense gaze with his. Silence brought us closer before my eyes lowered to his lips. *Is it finally the day I'll have my first kiss?*

But, he stepped back and questioned, ***"Kaisi hain aap?"*** (How are you?)

My smile faded as he stepped a few more paces.

"Jaisa aap chhodkar gaye the," (Just the way you left.) I replied and saw him walk toward his trunk, chuckling to himself.

"Arthaath abhi bhi nahaati-dhoti nahi hain aap," (It means you still don't bathe.) He replied, taking his clothes out.

I took a sharp breath. Enough was enough!!!

I was desperate to live with him, dying with each passing moment, and here he was, making fun of me.

For two years, I waited for him, hoping that when he returned, we could advance our relationship. We would discuss things further and perhaps consider marriage.

But he was still treating me like a young and foolish girl.

"Rudra, aapke jeevan mein koi aur hai kya?" (Is there anyone else in your life?) I couldn't stop myself.

Turning around, he looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. ***"Nahi to,"*** (No.)

I sighed in relief. "So why aren't we like other couples? Why don't you come closer to me? And why haven't we kissed yet?" I asked.

Inhaling a deep breath, he asked, "How many couples do you know who are prince and princess, whose families are enemies and are having a secret affair?" I closed my eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh.

I tried to count, but I couldn't think of any. "None," I muttered sadly.

He questioned again, "What did you say?"

"I said none," I exclaimed a little louder.

His gaze softened, and with a smile, he inched closer. Standing before me, he grazed my cheek hesitantly, beholding my eyes. "What do you want, Nandani?"

The way my name rolled off his tongue wretchedly flattered me. His deep eyes—dark oceans of mystery—captivated me instantly, yet I endeavored to look beyond them. I found myself walking on the coastlines, the waves slowly teasing my feet and pulling me inside. Their sound and the scent of the sea breeze sent chills down my spine. I couldn't see the end of it. There was just loneliness to the horizon, a silence of its kind, and the possibility of a storm erupting at any moment.

Strangely, everything was scary yet attractive. I wanted to swim through those tides, to feel what lay beyond, to see where they ended, and to discover how deep they were.

“What do you want, Nandani?” he questioned again. Blood rushed to my cheeks, and my knees got weaker.

He took a step forward, closing the distance between us, and I looked at him courageously.

“All,” I said. “I want it all, Rudra. Waiting is impossible now. For two years, you feel someone around you—you crave to talk to them, you burn for them. I have had enough. Now, please give me all. Tell me that you love me and make love to me. I trust you, and I love you so much.”

The silence followed before he asked, “Are you sure? I mean, isn't it unprincipled to do such things before marriage?” Worry laced his tone.

I shook my head. “Sooner or later, I know we will get married, and I'll be your wife. And these principles and traditions cannot bind my love for you. I’m all yours,” I meant it.

I had no doubts about him in my heart, not even a bit. He could be an enemy to others, but every time we spent time alone, he always behaved courteously towards me, showing respect and maintaining boundaries.

How could I ask for someone better than him?

“And I’m all yours, too,” he confessed, taking his hand close to my cheeks.

I inhaled a shaky breath when I felt his hand against my skin. As his touch aroused every inch of me, I blinked nervously. His palm was big enough to cover the side of my neck, gently grazing my earlobe.

Pulling my face closer to his, he looked intently into my eyes, the tension growing between us. I had never felt this way. He’s never touched me this way, ever.

His natural, mild scent enveloped my mind, leaving my throat dry.

He leaned in closer. My lashes fluttered heavily, and my lips parted as his warm breath fanned over my face. The distance between our lips narrowed, and I closed my eyes, feeling the sparks running down my spine.

I never thought it'd feel like this.

I felt his pruned beard against my cheek, and a low moan slipped from my mouth. He pressed his lips against the side of my jaw, and I muttered under my breath, “Rudra,” It came out almost inaudible.

He moved his lips closer to my ear, his uneven breaths tickling my stomach. I clutched the fabric of my lehenga, trying to suppress my inaudible moans.

“I want to see you tonight,” he muttered, and how he said it left me utterly stunned. My heart pounded intensely in my chest as he added, “Naked,”

The heat erupting through his words warmed my insides. “And you have to write down everything in a letter for me. What do you want me to do to you? How do I take you? You'll have to be very particular with your words,”

I was utterly taken aback by his demand, my eyes wide open at the tone he used. I felt flushed and thought, if merely his lips on my cheek could make me so hot,

how would it feel when he took me?

I truly wanted to experience what I learned in my classes—the sensation of the first touch, intimacy, and all those sparks. I felt a bit of it, which made me crave more, feeling insane.

“Very particular?” I gulped, my voice a mere whisper.

“Yes, very, very particular. I want every detail. If you miss something, I miss that too,” he said, gently touching my cheek. The earnest expression on his face indicated that he was serious.

“Alright?” he asked, and I nodded. “So, tonight?” he further asked, and I nodded again, whispering. “Yes, I love you.”

His lips curved into a light smile, and he murmured, looking into my eyes. “I love you too, Nandani.”

These words from him made my day. He had never said them before, but he did now, looking directly into my eyes. He finally expressed his love for me.

Was I going insane?

Totally!

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

I spent my entire day contemplating and jotting down my thoughts—thoughts of what I wanted, thoughts I wanted him to read. However, I was unsure of where to start and where to end, what to write and what not to write.

My seduction lessons have taught me that physical relationships encompass far more than just intercourse and pleasure. A new understanding flourishes when two people come together and engage in physical intimacy. As their bodies reveal vulnerabilities by shedding clothes, they experience an incredible solace blooming between them.

And I yearned to feel that solace.

I had heard about his bravery on the battlefield until now, and he had an assertive tone whenever he spoke, which made me nervous. Consequently, I always panicked when talking to him, mainly because he was much older than I was.

I loved him, but sometimes I felt passive. He was mature, incredibly attractive, and one of the most eligible bachelors. I had always desired someone like him.

“What are you doing?” Suman’s voice startled me, and I quickly folded the sheet.

“Nothing,” I said. She looked at me, unsure. “You look… defensively surprised.” She said.

I raised my brows and retorted ghastly, “No, it's nothing... everything’s fine.”

She squinted her eyes, unconvinced, but agreed anyway, “Okay, I’m buying it.”

I plastered a smile on my face and nodded.

She left, and I sighed my shock away, taking a breath of peace. Had she asked me anything, I wouldn't have lied. She was my partner in crime, and she knew everything about me. And by everything, I mean everything.

I went back to writing the letter Rudra had asked me to, but I was still uncertain about what to say.

Honestly, I just wanted to feel him, not just sexually, but his tender touches on my hand, my arms, and maybe sometimes, teasingly, on my neck.

Just the thought of it made me a jittery mess. This was it. This was what I wanted.

Unfolding the paper, I began writing down my thoughts.

'As my eyes capture the sight of you anywhere around me, my heart begins racing. Every time I see you smiling, sensations wave through my body, settling at the base of my spine. But deep down, I feel this is not enough. I yearn for more, more than just a smile, more than the subtle touches. I long for the feeling of your fingers on my arms, on the curves of my waist, somewhere sensitive, like my feet.

I cannot precisely describe what I want, but I am sure that I desire something more than what we have now. I want you around me, your touch that will set my skin on fire and consume me to the bones, which will ultimately illuminate every inch of me.

I want you to see me more than anyone ever has, and I want to see you more than anyone ever has. I want us so close that our breathing feels wild yet warm against our faces. I want us to be one, once and for all.

That's it!'

Once I finished, I sighed deeply and rolled the letter back, keeping it safe.

This was what I wanted. I wanted him more than anything, and everything I desired was solely for him and related to him.

Standing up, I looked out the window to check the time. The orange hues in the purple sky, with the setting sun on the horizon, indicated it was almost evening. If I wanted to meet him at night, I'd have to finish my work soon.

I hid the letter and went to the kitchen. After instructing the cooks on the dinner menu, which included most of what Rudra liked, I retired to meet my mother and grandmother.

Later, we all gathered in the dining hall, where everyone was seated.

I found Rudra and Abhinandan, my twin brother, sitting together. They seemed to be engaged in some serious conversation.

I sat next to my mother and grandmother, facing Rudra, Abhinandan, and my father.

My grandfather started the tradition of family dinners. Since then, everyone in the family, along with close guests, has gathered for dinner together.

As the attendants started serving the food, I glanced at Rudra, who didn't spare me a look. They were both talking, and it looked pretty grave.

"Nandani," suddenly, my mother's call caught my attention, and I looked at her. "What happened? You look lost," she asked. I hesitantly shook my head.

“Nothing,” I instantly answered, and she frowned, looking at me.

“Your father told me to ask you about the Swayamvar’s[4] invites. He is concerned about your marriage. I hope you know that,” she reminded me, and I inhaled a deep breath. “Yes… Yes, I do,” I agreed bitterly.

“You've already rejected seven alliances, Princess. He is concerned about what is going on in your mind. Now that you are of age and have completed your education, what is preoccupying you? This is the right stage to get married and settle down,” she illustrated in a neutral tone.

“She is right, Nandani,” my grandmother interjected, “You must get married now. You’ve rejected every proposal in the last two years and have not given a valid reason for doing so,”

I looked at her, clueless. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t lie, and my heart started beating rapidly.

“I will Maasa[5], Daadisa. I will get married. It's just that I’m afraid and waiting for the right man,” I said. They nodded, and thankfully, as the food was served, we all focused on eating.

But I had to talk to Rudra. I needed to know what was going on in his mind and when he would ask my parents for my hand in marriage.

He was merely a guard for King Surgami Dev Singh, his uncle. However, I was content with being his wife. I didn’t desire any titles or recognition; I’ve had them throughout my life. Furthermore, to serve the people and engage in social welfare, I didn’t need any entitlement. The determination to work was enough.

I was trying to concentrate on dinner and realized that he hadn’t looked at me even once. He was very much absorbed in eating.

He has always been that way—a disciplinarian. His schedule was well-defined, and he was known for being very firm. Always.

If he eats, he eats. If he fights, he simply fights. No distractions can divert his mind at all.

Once dinner was finished, everyone retired to their respective chambers.

I needed to take a bath because I was going to see him that night.

Returning to my chamber, I asked my attendants to prepare for my bath. In the meantime, I chose my clothes and detangled my braid to wash my hair.

Once the preparations were done, I took a long and refreshing bath. The attendees washed my hair and scrubbed my arms and legs with a paste to remove body hair.

After the bath, they helped me dry my hair, and I urged them to leave since their work was done.

From my window, I observed the attendees carrying flaming torches to light other torches and add oil to the lamps. This was a routine. Therefore, I patiently waited for them all to fall asleep.

Silence enveloped the night as it grew darker, and it was time for me to sneak out.

My heart hammered in my chest so vigorously that I could hardly breathe. My fingers trembled as I took out my nightgown.

Ruhani brought this nightwear from her empire. I liked its design—a full-length, flowy gown with strings in front, reminiscent of an overcoat. I had to wear it with a translucent, thigh-length, loose inner.

I changed into that outfit and covered my head with a dupatta.

Taking the secret pathway, I walked toward the guest chambers, wanting to avoid getting caught. Upon reaching the back of his chamber, I jumped inside through the window.

A striking fragrance hit my nose, and I shivered. I noticed the dim lighting in the chamber. Inhaling deeply, I walked toward the center of the chamber, where he usually was.

The bed and couches were empty and untouched. My heart raced as I searched for him. Suddenly, a warm presence looming behind me put me on alert.

Two manly hands slipped around my waist. A familiar scent enveloped me, and I realized who it was; my lips arched into a smile.

But the smile was replaced by a burning flush when he pressed his lips gently against the curve of my neck.

His wild, warm breaths near my ear left me gasping for air.

“I asked you to write something for me. I expect you’ve done your assignment,” he inquired, and I meekly nodded.

As he slowly turned me to look at him, a gasp escaped my lips as I gazed at his bare chest. I blinked nervously, glancing at his broad shoulders, wide and puffy chest, muscular arms, and abs, which made me feel hot, too hot. He was undoubtedly strong.

Holding out his hand, he asked for the letter, and with unsteady hands, I passed it to him.

With a benign smile, he unrolled the letter, and I watched as his eyes scanned the sheet. By the end, he nibbled on his lower lip and refolded the letter.

Looking into my eyes, he slowly kept the letter on a side table and moved closer to me, stopping right an inch away. “Did you miss me?” he whispered in a low tone, and I accepted, nodding. “Do you want me to touch you?” I nodded again.

“Words,” he demanded, and I muttered faintly, “Yes,”

“Where?” he asked. I gulped anxiously, out of words and inept to form a sentence.

“On my cheeks,” I breathed out heavily. He cupped my cheek and abruptly asked, “Do you want to marry me?” I looked into his eyes, frowning at the sudden question. But my answer was clear: “Yes,” I complied.

“You are very well aware that I cannot take you until we get married.”

“I know,” I acknowledged.

“And I don't have a home to provide for you, and I'm unsure if I will ever be the throne’s successor. Do you still want to live with me, knowing all of this?” He asked. And my answer was yet again the same, “Yes,”

“Why do you love me so much?” he probed. I bit my lip and swallowed to moisten my dry throat.

“Because it's you whom I've always romanticised about. My sweetest thoughts and my wildest fantasies are of you. No matter how much I try, I am incapable of envisioning myself with anyone else in such a way. It is unthinkable for me. I do not know what in the name of love this is, but this is it,” I confessed.

He held my arms and walked me toward the dressing table. I looked at myself in the mirror, standing in front of him, and he gazed into my eyes through the reflection and said, “From this moment on and for always, you are mine. But, you have to promise that it’ll only be me you will call your world, Agreed?” He questioned, and I looked into his mystic eyes through the mirror.

It was as if something magnetic had firmly pulled me into their attraction range. “Yes, I agree,” I accepted, and he turned me around to look at him.

He cupped my cheek gently and abruptly pushed me against the dressing table. I balanced my hands immediately behind me on the table to support my weight and looked into his eyes. His face was dangerously close to mine as he looked at me ardently.

His hand moved toward my hair, which was tied in a bun, and I breathed heavily as he pulled out the hairpin, freeing it and letting it fall onto the table. I felt his fingers travel down the front of my gown to the strings.

He looked at me and countered, “Are you sure?” I nodded courageously. “Yes.”

The proximity made my heart beat at an abnormal pace. For the first time, we stood so close, feeling each other's breath.

As he placed his forehead on mine, the overwhelming feeling made my eyelids heavy, making it hard for me to keep my eyes open. His gaze dropped to my lips as his hands strode down to pull the strings of my gown open.

As he untied the knot, it felt like my grip loosened on the last string of sanity I was clinging to. I felt numb, yet every inch of my body felt alive. My knees weakened, so I leaned over to balance on the table.

The curiosity to know what lies ahead kept me on edge, causing me to tilt my head back. The warmth of his cheek against mine made me close my eyes to fully experience it.

Slowly, he let his fingers move the coat, intruding as he circled his arm around my waist. And as I felt his muscular hand around my stomach, I couldn't help the low moan slipping from the back of my throat.

The warmth of his skin soothed me inside out in this biting weather.

Whilst I thought of opening my eyes and looking at him, I felt his hand tugging at the hem of my gown.

Steadily, he slid the gown off my shoulders, letting the loose garment pool at my feet. The cold breeze hit my exposed arms, causing the hair on my skin to stand on end.

He took a step back and held my hand. Looking into my eyes, he earnestly kissed my palms and turned me back towards the mirror.

Standing behind me, he collected all my hair, and I craned my head slightly to the side as he slowly slid it aside on my neck.

With one hand, he held my hair to my right and glided his forefinger on my neck with his other hand. My eyes fluttered closed as I shivered at the dazzling touch.

I saw him slowly leaning into my neck, and an inaudible moan escaped through my parted lips when I felt his lips brushing against my neck. He applied pressure, and the sensational rush made my eyes tear.

It was so beautiful and captivating that I couldn't help but close my eyes and surrender to it.

He continued to kiss the side of my neck, sucking my skin. Once, twice, thrice... a cry of pain slipped from my mouth as the impact became a little harder.

“Rudra…” I mewled, and he moved his lips away from my neck.

A dark red mark formed on my neck, and he slowly mumbled in my ear. “What happens in reality is completely apart from what you've learned in your classes.” His deep voice made me lower my gaze as I felt timid.

But the questions arising in my mind urged me to be brave, so I asked him, “What's the difference?” I lifted my gaze, finding his eyes gaping at my neck, and felt his hand skimming my thigh.

He crouched down and sucked on my neck again, a bit harsher, scraping his teeth a little deeper.

A profound shudder passed through my frame when his hand moved along my thigh, inside the inner, oozing my brain, which left me in a breathy mess.

“It is very painful in reality,” he whispered against my ear, and I closed my eyes, giving in to the sensations driving me crazy.

“Very painful?” I asked in a shaky tone, and he nipped my earlobe, whispering, “Very, very, very painful.” I felt as if I had just melted away with the heat as soon as he said that.

His fingers grazed my inner thigh, and I audaciously asked, “How painful is it?”

Slowly his other hand wrapped around my waist, and he sucked on my earlobe, making me tilt my head to the side as I felt his teeth dig over my lobe, biting me, making me whimper, “Aahh…”

“This much,” He described, and I chewed on my lip, opening my eyes to look at him through the mirror. I saw a shallow smile on his face, and he softly cleared, “For the whole night,”

A strong shiver ran down my spine, and my face dropped upon hearing this. He straightened his face to look at me, and I gulped, furrowing my brows, imagining myself moaning with pain for the whole night.

I wondered why no one ever mentioned this to me earlier.

“Will it make me cry harder?” I asked, blinking at him and gulping down my anxiety. He made me face him, shoving me against the dressing table as he gently held my cheek and looked into my eyes.

“No, you will not cry harder…” I felt him breathe against my cheek, planting a kiss, and he wildly said, “You will scream harder, my name,”

I moaned as his lips moved to my jaw and asked curiously, “How are you so sure?” He nipped my jaw and responded, “Everybody knows what they are capable of.” I cupped his cheek and made him look at me.

My lips, desperate to taste his, I requested in a pleading tone, “Kiss me, please.”

He looked into my eyes, gently caressing my lips with his thumb, and gingerly commanded, “Open your mouth.”

I parted my lips as he inched closer. I could feel his lips over mine, but instead, he slipped his thumb inside my mouth, brushing against my teeth. He smiled, and I playfully bit down on his thumb.

“I heard that your father is looking for a son-in-law,” He affirmed, and I brushed my tongue on his thumb, nodding. He inquired, “Will he ever agree to our marriage?” I gulped and shook my head dejectedly. He took his thumb out and caressed my lips again.

Taking a few steps away, he held my hand, saying, “Come.” He guided me toward the bed and made me stand against it. Enclosing his arm around my waist, he pulled me closer to him and began leaning in.

My body arched back as he made me sit on its edge. Keeping his one knee on the side of my hips, he pushed me onto the bed and lay over me.

The touch, the feelings, and the blossoming emotions began to take over my being.

I felt intense sensations wave all over my body when I looked at his lips, moving closer to my uncovered shoulder. His lips connected with my collarbone, and I gaped at my mouth to let out a sensuous moan.

His lips were warm, making me go wild. My legs were between his, and I could feel all his weight over me. Reaching out to my wrists, he pinned them over my head, making me arch my back in anticipation.

“Ahh… Rudra,” I wailed when I felt him sucking my neck harder, biting it fervently and torturing my skin. I was sure it would leave marks.

I could feel my brain becoming hazy with the sensations, the chamber slowly turning dark, and my vision blurring. I felt his hand on my thighs, crawling its way up to my core as I heaved with an urge.

In time, everything turned utterly dark. I could feel our breathing getting frantic. And I didn't know when I gave in to my slumber.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

I woke up when I felt someone shaking me, “Nandani,”

“Wake up,”

“What are you doing here?”

Muffled voices invaded my ears, and I tried to open my eyes. For a few moments, my vision was unclear from the sleep, and I rubbed my eyes, adjusting to the light.

I noticed the presence of my mother, grandmother, and father as I moved my head to look further. “Maasa—”

“What the hell are you doing here?” My father abruptly cut me off when I tried to speak.

I pressed my palm against my head as it was dripping with pain. And my mother urged him. “Can you please leave us alone? All the men?”

“Don't you dare protect her, Abhi? “ he yelled.

She looked at him. “I am not protecting her, but let me at least find out what happened in the first place,” she tried to explain. My eyes started tearing up as I tried to recall what had happened last night.

I was with Rudra and woke up in his chamber.

I watched my father leave us alone and tried to sit up to cover myself.

“What are you doing here, Nandani?” My mother asked, grabbing my cheeks. Her voice was laced with anger and hurt.

“Maasa….” I attempted to speak and looked around to realise it was noon already. I tried to ask with a trembling tone. “Where is... Rudra?” A firm slap landed on my cheek, making my face jerk aside with the force.

“Rudra? You slept with him?” Maasa asked. I placed my hand on my cheek and looked at my mother with tearful eyes. “Maasa, where is he? Please…” I pleaded, and she yelled again.

“He left. He left last night. What were you doing with him in his chamber? Don’t you know that a girl carries the responsibility of her family's esteem? What, pray tell me, are you doing on his bed? What did you do? What in the name of immorality did you do, Nandani?”

Did he…Leave? Did he really leave?

My entire being went still upon hearing it.

My mother was, so I turned to my grandmother.

“Daadisa, I’m truly sorry, but I love him... please. He is the one I want to get married to,” and just then, another slap landed on my cheek, accompanied by a letter slamming onto my face.

“Who said that he will marry you? Don’t you know he is our enemy's son? How could you forget to stay within your limits? Who will marry you now?” I looked at my mother, screaming at me, and picked up the letter with shaking fingers.

I closed my eyes as my grieving heart told me something entirely different. He loves me. I tried to remind myself and timidly unrolled the letter.

“Ek chhot aapke parivaar ne humaare parivaar ko di thi, uttar mein ek chhot hum aapke parivaar ko dete hain!” *(A scar your family gave to mine and a scar I give back to yours!*)

It read.

I read it again.

Again and again. Until it shattered me into millions of pieces.

My grandmother embraced me as I wept my heart out. “Daadisa, I loved him so much. How could he do this to me?” I sobbed, feeling clueless about what to do. How would I face my father and the people of the kingdom?

“Get dressed, Nandani,” Suddenly, my mother jerked the gown onto my face, and I looked at her.

“Maasa, I’m sorry, please. I truly didn't know that he was conspiring against me.” She glared at me sharply and ordered again.

“GET DRESSED,” I nodded. As I stepped down from the bed, I felt my bones hurt and yelped in pain.

Tears streamed down my face as I realized he had indeed done it. I didn’t remember anything after he touched my thighs, but the pain I felt told me a completely different story.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I turned to face the bed.

Something in me broke, like those bangles I wore last night, which were now shattered into pieces, scattered across the bed.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I sneaked out in the middle of the night, leaving her sleeping figure alone on the bed because I couldn't do it. I just had to spend one night with her, and I could not do that.

Coward.

I cursed myself, trying to calm my heart, which was hammering outrageously.

I couldn't do it for many reasons. One of them was my conscience. It kept arguing with my brain.

I felt great for the last two years. I tried to suppress and control this feeling because it wasn't how I was supposed to feel on the path I was walking. However, as soon as I looked at her, my calm composure went down the drain, my emotions spiralled out of control, and my heart began to pound again.

I could not stand her. She was becoming my weakness. Her face, her smile, her kindness—I thought I could control it all, but she was clearly winning me over.

She was so undeniable.

To prevail over her, I had to feed her a sleeping herb. I knew we couldn't get married because of our enmity, and I certainly couldn't keep her for myself, even in my illusions. Her father hated me, and I hated her father; we were no match.

I thought I'd use her as bait, but she wrecked everything. EVERYTHING.

I pulled the reins tighter as I had to run fast. I could feel her lingering smell tormenting my insides. It was galvanising, gripping me in its essence, and I wanted to get away from it. Only when I crossed the borders of her Empire did I breathe.

I didn't want to see her again. We were enemies, and we could never be together. I reminded myself of this once more.

I couldn't forget about my father and the childhood I lost because of her parents.

Her father would never have let me marry her. Moreover, I wanted to kill her father and brother, and if I married her, it'd be difficult to do so because I'd be bound to her and probably have to think of her happiness and all.

Why was I even thinking about marrying her? Where did that thought come from? What the heck was happening to me?

I gripped my head in frustration and pulled the reins of my horse to stop him.

I stepped down and moved closer to his head, stroking his neck firmly. Patting his chest in appreciation, I let him find some grass to eat.

Sitting under the tree, I peeked at the sky. It was a moonlit night, and the sky was filled with stars. The noise of insects invading the silence made everything a little more calming.

Closing my eyes, I didn't know when sleep took over my senses. I woke up to the sound of birds chirping and sunlight slowly falling on my face.

Praying to Surya Dev[6] for another beautiful day, I resumed my journey back to Suryagarh. The King must be ‘missing me’— Missing taunting me[!]

Once reached, I left my horse in the stable and walked towards my room.

Yes, a room. I did not have a chamber. I was just the king's guard and the head commander of the army. I was allotted a room and lived like any other ordinary soldier.

My room had no beds, so I slept on the ground. I was not offered a seat in meetings and stood outside the King's chamber, merely guarding him.

My break was over. I asked for a few days off, and he granted them to me for the first time.

I wanted to see Nandani once and check if I could control my emotions around her. For two years, I had strived to gain control over everything, but I felt like a complete failure when I saw her standing before me.

Her long hair, slender neck and beautiful face, her big eyes filled with kohl, and when she stared at me with those eyes intensely, I felt like I was losing my sanity.

Why was I so cowardly and uncontrollable in front of her?

I didn't want to touch her, but when she was near me, smelling so divine, I just wanted to engulf her in my arms. In those few moments, I just kept forgetting that she was the daughter of my enemy and that I was on a mission.

I cursed myself as I donned my guard's attire.

But from now on, I promised to keep myself in check, forget her, and focus on my mission.

I secretly had to create an army because I was waiting for the king to grant me my claim to the throne, which was fine. However, if he did not, I would have to wage war, and once I won, I would wage another war against Mahabaleshgarh.

As I stepped outside his chamber, the soldiers guarding the door bowed in greeting. I returned their greeting and took my place beside them.

This was my job.

Everything was going fine. I immersed myself in my work, trying to forget my attraction to her, and kept myself busy aiming for my targets and fulfilling my ambitions.

Now, another reason why I could not sleep with her and had to intoxicate her was that I could not have sexual intercourse with her, with any woman, until my coronation Yagya[7] would be performed.

Since I was a nineteen-year-old boy, I'd been celibate. My master told me to practise it, learn to have control, and surpass every state. If a man could control his hunger, thirst, pain, emotions and sex drive, no one could distract him from his goal.

But she did.

I considered cutting corners and using her to weaken her empire and ultimately defeat it. However, I couldn’t get closer to her; I couldn't even kiss her. I knew that if I had kissed her even once, all my sacrifices and control would be in vain. I wouldn't just have stopped at her lips.

I had two plans. One was to cheat, betray Mahabaleshgarh, and use Nandani as my shortcut to success. The other was to have patience and control, to achieve everything decently through hard work. But I couldn't do what I thought I'd do to her.

So, I had to choose the latter and win everything through my hard work. Hence, I left her.

One week had passed, and I was still trying to get over her. As usual, I was guarding outside the King's chamber when he called me inside,

“Rudra,” I opened his chamber door to ask. “Yes, your Majesty?” He was seated comfortably on the couch, holding a letter in his hand.

“Get yourself prepared. You are coming with me to Mahableshgarh,” he informed me, and I frowned.

“What?” I countered, and with a smile, he clarified. “Yes. Rajvardhan is marrying off his daughter, and I will attend it. And since you are my royal guard, you go everywhere with me, right?” I nodded.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” This information struck me strangely, and I was deeply shocked.

She is getting married?!

I felt a sudden uneasiness arising in my heart and exited the chamber. I furrowed my brows because I couldn't understand why she had suddenly decided to get married. One week ago, she was ready to hand herself over entirely to me, and now she would marry someone else.

And out of nowhere, my brain questioned, *"Why am I feeling so restless with this information?"* It was her life, and she could marry anyone she wanted. She had to marry someone if I didn’t. Sooner or later, this day had to come.

I gulped the painful lump in my throat as I didn't know what to do.

As the night drew to a close, I packed my belongings, and we began our journey the next morning. As usual, I was in my guard's apparel.

As I crossed the threshold of Mahabaleshgarh, I noticed the decorations and chaos that erupted within the palace. It was true; she was indeed getting married.

The king was given the largest of the guest chambers, and he asked me to guard its door. With my helmet on, no one could recognize me, but dread gradually overtook my heart.

By afternoon, I observed the king departing to meet with other kings. He left me outside his chamber and returned later in the evening while I stayed in my place.

A part of me wanted to know whom Nandani would choose as her husband. She was a wealthy princess, and her father had organized such an extravagant

Swayamvar.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

Days passed, yet I couldn't get over everything that had happened. It had been a week, but no one talked to me, especially my father.

Stress and worry consumed us, as we knew the attendees had already leaked all the information, and everyone in the kingdom would learn of their princess's tragic involvement.

No man or family would accept me anymore, as I had no reputation to be a part of an honorable family.

I confined myself to the four walls of my chamber, crying all week, not knowing what I was going to do anymore.

But suddenly, a thought crossed my mind, so I wiped away my tears and got off the bed.

He hated us.

And if he came here with the same hatred, it meant he now understood our strengths and weaknesses. If he wasn't here for me, he was here to learn about us. He wanted to know about us because he was seeking revenge.

And if he were seeking revenge, then this wasn't it. Surely, I was no object he could use to avenge his family.

How could he use me for his revenge?

But all I knew was that I wouldn't let him ever succeed in his devious plans. He punished my family for a crime they didn't commit and hurt their pride. I knew he must be eyeing the throne of Suryagarh.

He wanted to be a king. Always.

But I'll never let you become a king until I am alive. You shouldn't have done this to me, Rudra, to any girl. You must face the repercussions. I pledged to myself.

Coming out of my chamber, I walked to my mother's and found her seated on the couch.

"Maasa," Going near her, I remarked, "I want to get married. Please extend the invitation of my swayamvar to King Surgami Dev Singh."

She rose from her seat aghast and shouted, "Are you out of your mind?"

I controlled my surging emotions and exclaimed confidently, "No, I'm not." She looked at me, horrified, exclaiming, "Surgami dev is an old man."

"And one of the most influential kings of Indira," I imparted.

"No, we're not sending him the invitation," she said.

"You will, Maasa. You'll have to," I appealed and stepped closer to her. "With no heir of the king, Rudra is next in line. And if he becomes the king, he will wage a war against Mahabaleshgarh." I filled her in.

“Since not for me, he, no doubt, was here to get a fix on all our strengths and weaknesses. Besides, if he wages a war against us, I'll be the one to die a thousand deaths, maasa. I cannot bear the thought of my father and brother fighting a war that I could prevent by marrying Surgami Dev Singh and conceiving his child. I will give him an heir; ultimately, Rudra will never get his hands on the throne.” I continued, taking her hands in mine.

“So please try to understand, Maasa. Baapusa[8] is getting older, and Abhinandan is too ingenious to face a man he thought was his friend in the war. We shall not let Rudra succeed in his devious plans, and only a marriage alliance with Suryagarh can prevent such a perilous situation from arising,” I quavered, and my mother stated,

“Your father will never agree to it.” I shook my head, holding her shoulder.

“He will have to, Maasa. You will talk to him, please. I cannot let him harm my brother and my father. He is powerful, earnest and has fought many wars, but our Abhinandan… he is inexperienced, and we are all too well aware of what we are capable of,”

She caressed my cheeks tenderly with her hands and affirmed, “You don't have to do this. What if he wouldn’t attack us? What if Surgami Dev Singh will not let him be the next successor?”

I placed my palm over her hand on my face.

“Maasa, he will get the throne and attack us. I have spent days with him. I know who he is. You don't know how deftly he manipulated me to spend a night with him. Nobody can escape his trap, for he is a beguilingly skilful deceiver.” I described his true self to her.

“So if we do not act soon, misfortunes will keep unfolding in our family. He used Abhi and me as bait to divert our minds from political affairs. He succeeded in weakening our insides. But we must not give him the time to use that against us. So, please invite Surgami Dev Singh to the swayamvar. I request you please…”

I joined my hands, and she distressingly said, “Fine, if that’s what you believe, I shall address the invitation. But how will you spend the rest of your life with such an old man?”

“Maasa, my life has been ruined by me,” I said.

“Are you sure?” She asked me worriedly, and I answered with determination. “I've never been so sure.”

She nodded. “Alright, I'll try talking to your father,”

“No…” I urged, “Do not speak to him of this. He is infuriated and will undoubtedly deny it. You send the invitation and inform Baapusa that it is merely a peace proclamation between Mahabaleshgarh and Suryagarh. I will take care of the rest.” I concluded.

She burst into tears and sobbed, “But Nandani, he is an old man. How will you spend the rest of your whole life with him?”

Turning my back on her, I took a deep breath and, wiping the tears off my face, I deadpanned, “Maasa, I will be a queen. It is better to rule as a queen than live an ordinary life, marrying a man who will never love me,”

“Fine,” she finally agreed. “I will send the invitation.” I nodded and made my way back to my chamber.

My Swayamvar was to take place after three days, and I had to choose a groom for myself. The invitations had already been sent to everyone, and the wedding was scheduled for three weeks later.

My father was still angry with me; this was the least I could do for my family.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Three days went by, spent with utmost worry. Whenever I had time and privacy, I tried recollecting my memories of that night to remember what had happened.

I couldn't recall him taking me, like doing ‘that’ with me, but physically, I felt the pain when I woke up the next afternoon. And what about the broken bangles?

I wasn't able to decipher what exactly he did.

“Nandani, everyone is waiting for you in the palace hall for the celebration,” Suman informed me, and I looked at myself in the mirror.

The attendees have spent a long time decking me up for the day—the day I had to choose a man to get married to. Not every girl received this privilege of doing so, but it was of no use when I had axed my own feet, sabotaging my life.

I, on my own, destroyed my life by putting my faith in my enemy. I thought he was different, unlike his father, but he turned out to be worse.

“Shall we go?” Suman proposed, and I nodded at her. A group of attendees followed me as I walked towards the palace hall.

I had to do this for my family, especially for my brother, who hasn't spoken to anyone since he learned the truth. Rudra betrayed him, and I can tolerate anything but his unhappiness.

He did not meet me for once after that uneventful day.

As I emerged from my thoughts, my eyes fell on the beautifully decorated palace. It made me feel both good and bad. I knew life ahead was an uphill battle. My father would get enraged, but this was the sole way to protect my family.

Suddenly, I remembered the infamous proverb, *‘An Enemy of an Enemy is a Friend,’* and walked towards the hall.

I saw my father standing on the stairs outside, waiting for me to set foot inside together. I greeted him and he affectionately patted my head and breathed out, ***“Eshwar aapka bhala karein.”*** (God bless you)

I felt overwhelmed and teary, blinking at the ground as the attendees opened the door for us. After closing my eyes and calming myself, we entered inside.

As I walked behind my father, lowering my gaze, everyone in the hall stood up in honour of the royalty as the herald made our presence known.

Walking toward a couch, I took my seat and looked around. I noticed young princes from small states waiting for the ceremony to begin. However, one empty chair had me gulping anxiously.

What if he doesn't come?

I fastened my trembling fingers to keep my racing heart in check. My extended family members were taking their seats, but my brother was absent. I looked into my mother's eyes, expecting a particular suitor, specifically an older suitor.

My father began addressing the royal guests as everyone took their seats.

"I thank you all for enriching us with your cordial presence. You all have gathered here on the occasion of the Swayamvar of my daughter, Princess Rajnandani Mahabalesh, for whom you all have travelled so far. The event will continue for three days, and she will choose a man by the end. I welcome you all, and please seek what comfort you may." He completed his part, and everyone applauded in delight.

Suddenly, the royal herald announced, making me sigh in peace. "Attention!!! The King of Suryagarh, Surgami Dev Singh, is entering the palace hall."

"Finally," I mumbled under my breath and looked at my father, who frowned, holding onto his sword.

I watched the old man, well-built and strong, standing in all his glory. His hair was grey, but his physique was healthy. With broad shoulders and a tall body, he seemed nowhere near old.

A group of soldiers assembled behind him.

Everyone rose from their seats, followed by my father, who stepped off the couch and walked towards him.

"You, here?" he asked. The old king laughed boisterously, replying, "Yes, I am here." My father forced a laugh, and they both shared a formal hug.

"The preparations are marvellous," he assessed, patting my father's shoulder. My father countered, "Thank you, but are you here with a suitor?"

He laughed again, saying, "I am the suitor."

"What?" my father asked, astonished.

I watched as my mother stood up from her seat and walked toward them. She greeted the king, taking my father by surprise.

Though the atmosphere was tense, they both led him to his seat. My mother whispered something to my father, and he whipped his head around to look at me.

In dread, I turned my gaze south.

As my father sat back, the ceremony resumed. Once I was introduced to the royal guests, we all retired to our respective chambers.

After coming to my chamber, I sat on my bed, exhaling tiredly. My heart pounded absurdly, so I closed my eyes to get a grip.

Visuals of Surgami Dev Singh kept crossing my mind, and I was terrified. It was just his age; he wasn't an old man! He seemed active and looked as young as my

father.

“Nandani,” a voice caught my attention, and I looked at an alarmed Suman getting inside the chamber. She huffed in front of me.

Catching her breath, she sat beside me. “What?” I asked.

She informed me, “King Surgami Dev Singh wants to meet you,” and I wondered, with distress, why.

“Where?” I questioned. “In his guest chamber. Badi Maasa[9] told me to accompany you,” she mentioned.

I frowned upon hearing her. She called my mother Badi Maasa, and if my mother told her to do so, I would have to meet him.

“We’ll see him later after dinner,” I said, and she nodded.

By evening, everyone was busy at the dinner table. This was the right time to meet him.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I covered my face with the veil.

Suman tagged along as we walked towards one of the palace’s most enormous guest chambers to see him.

There was no enmity between Surgami Dev Singh and us. Whatever the hostility was, it ended with the death of Prince Suryadev Singh. And since we had to stop Rudra from becoming the king, it was a necessity to maintain this truce.

The noise of my anklets echoed in the hallways as I walked through them.

Reaching outside his chamber, I stopped at the doorways since I couldn’t see through the veil. I looked down at a pair of feet before me.

A familiar voice asked me in a low tone, “What are you doing here, Nandani?”

Acknowledging his presence, I immediately lifted my veil and found him standing outside, in armour, guarding the king’s chamber.

Anger rushed through my veins as I looked at his eyes, flaming in fury. Inhaling a deep breath, I commanded, “Open the door.”

In return, he stepped closer and gritted on my face, “Do not do it. He is my uncle.”

As soon as I looked at his face, his betrayal rushed back to my head and I spoke insolently, “So, consider me your aunt and the future queen of Suryagarh,” He looked around at all the attendees present there and muttered in a warning tone, “Don't you dare say that,”

I smugly replied, “Actually…watch me do that.”

The doors swung open, making me cover my face with the veil. He stepped back when the king looked at us.

“You are here,” He exclaimed. Striding forth, I greeted him, joining both my palms with respect. “You invited me, your majesty. Of course, I had to come,” I replied gracefully, and he laughed.

“Come inside,” he said, and I noticed Rudra balling his palms into fists, his knuckles turning white, and anger evident on his face.

Drawing a deep breath, I took a step forward, and from the corner of my eye, I saw him stepping forward to get inside the chamber.

“Rudra, you wait outside,” the king said, but he affirmed with a clipped tone, “I'd rather be inside to protect you. I do not trust Mahabaleshgarh yet.”

The king gave a steady, assuring laugh and said, “That is certainly not necessary. She is Princess Nandani, my would-be wife.”

“Wife?” Rudra countered with a frown.

“Yes. Nandani and I are getting married this month, and I invited her to know something about her if she would not mind telling me,” he explained, sitting comfortably on the couch.

“No, Your Majesty. It would be an honour to take you as my husband, and I look forward to conversing with you before the wedding to clear all the doubts,” I expressed graciously, masking my inner turmoil.

“Nandani,” the king responded, “I hope you know I wish to marry you at this age to secure an heir to my throne.” I stood there timidly and answered, “Yes, your majesty. I’m very well aware of it. And I shall try my best to give you an heir,” I announced.

He smiled and suddenly asked, “But I want to know if you are pure.” From my peripheral vision, I glanced at Rudra, who stood blank-faced and still.

After a brief moment, I meekly replied, “I am Your Majesty. I am untouched,” I answered.

“But there is a hearsay of you being involved with a man,” He queried.

Blinking rapidly, I swallowed the tightness in my throat. “Why don't you examine me with your trusted vaidya[10], your majesty?” I suggested, curbing my rage. Not because the King questioned my dignity, but because the man who had ruined it was standing in the same room as me.

I don't understand why he had to feed me some hypnotising herb when I was entrusting myself with him. Why did he have to make me unconscious to do it?

The King, walking closer, pulled me out of my reverie. I could see him, through the veil, standing in front of me when he said, “A sensible idea, perhaps.”

My heart kept pounding in worry, but I tried to calm my demeanour as I agreed with him.

I was determined to stop Rudra from obtaining the throne. He toyed with me for it, and so I would engage with anyone to thwart his success.

“I shall take my leave first, then, Your Majesty,” I said, and he replied, “Yes, you may.”

I was leaving the chamber when I caught sight of Rudra following me out of the corner of my eye, but the king immediately called him back.

Feeling apprehensive, I walked towards my chamber. As soon as I stepped in, Suman voiced her concern, “How will you prove it, Nandani?”

“What?” I asked. “That you are untouched?” She counter-questioned.

Lifting my veil off, I threw my dupatta aside and sat on the edge of the bed.

“He didn't have to drug me to lie with me,” I let tears trail down my cheeks. “I was willing to do it, anyway. There was consent, intention, and trust. There was everything, yet he had to drug me and make me lose my consciousness... Do you know what that shows?” I asked, looking at her. “It means that... that he incriminated me falsely. He actually did nothing,” I hypothesised, but she became worried.

“But what if he did? What if he did, when you were not in your senses?” I closed my eyes, chewing on my lower lip.

“He did not, Suman. Because if he did, he wouldn't be here. I’m unsure, so I want to know what his next step is. Why did he come back again? What’s his motive?” She nodded, muttering in a slow voice, “Okay,”

“Can you please not mention what happened in the king's chamber to anyone?” She looked at me, taken aback, and I added, “If Maasa asks you what we talked about, just tell her we had a casual exchange about our common interests and the King wanted to know about my perspective on political matters. Will you?” I pleaded with her, and she asked, “Why?” in a confused tone.

Standing up from the bed, I walked towards her and held her shoulders, “If you tell her the truth, she will never let this happen. And I want it to happen, at any cost. Do you understand?” I asked, and she nervously nodded.

“Now, please leave me alone for some time,” I said, and she left the chamber. I heard the door closing and sat on my bed again.

Suddenly, a thudding sound invaded my privacy, and I instantly looked towards the window, astonished. I got up from my bed and found him standing there.

He sneaked into my chamber over the window?!

Taking furious steps, he swiftly strode toward me and clutched my neck, pushing me forcefully against one of the tall bedposts and looking at me menacingly.

“Whatever you are trying to pull, drop it,” he growled in a low tone, his chest puffed up, his nose flared, and his eyes glaring daggers, proving how furious he was.

I held his hand and tried to loosen his hold on me, “Leave—” I was struggling for air, and my lungs were suffocating with the way he tightly suppressed my throat.

“He is my uncle, Nandani. Anyone but him,” I snickered, wiggling under his hold. “Anyone but him.” His grip on my neck tightened, and my head tilted back with effect, making me look into his eyes.

“He is an evil man. He will use you,” he stated, and I gulped a huge lump down my dry throat.

“You already did,” He pulled me closer by my neck, our lips merely away.

“He insulted you by asking about your virginity.” He said. I made an effort to inhale, my neck hurt gravely, and a lone tear of anger escaped my eyes. My face

definitely would have turned pale, getting choked like that. My lips quivered as I struggled to speak.

Ultimately, he loosened his hold, only to cup my cheek. I panted and looked back into his eyes with the same vigour.

“He was just concerned about the child’s legitimacy, the heir of Suryagarh's throne,” I said.

He clenched his jaw and drew his face nearer to mine.

Hooking his fingers into my kamarband[11], he, with his other hand, abruptly pulled me closer to him by my waist. My stomach flipped with extreme anxiety, and my knees turned wobbly.

“You will never bear his child in this belly of yours. If you'll ever bear a child, it'll be mine and only mine,” he emphasised, stroking his cold fingers up and down my waist, making my insides shudder.

Due to our height differences, his face leaned over mine. His wild breaths fanned over my face, leaving me gasping for air. Holding my breath, I grumbled, “Watch your mouth. You cannot abed your aunt, boy.”

In a flash, he had me in a chokehold again, and I could feel anger dripping from his eyes. The firm grip of his fingers broke my gold kamarband[11], and he brought his lips close to mine.

“I will... and remember, when I do, you will not be able to walk for weeks,” I chuckled humorlessly. Inhaling sharply and with my twitching lips, I tried to remark, “Keep dreaming!”

He suddenly pushed me onto the bed, pinning both my hands over my head.

“Rudra!” I squirmed under him, and he immediately turned me over to my front, shifting his weight entirely over my body.

I went immobile in a fraction of a moment, and he fisted my hair bun from behind to keep me still.

“Ahhh…” I wailed and sensed his hand streaming down to my nape from my hair. He had me frozen within moments.

I shivered as I felt the graze of his lips on my revealing back.

“Rudra, please...don't ruin me anymore,” I wriggled to get off his hold, but he sucked intensely on my back.

“Ahh,” I whimpered as soon as I felt his lips instil tension in my skin.

Gripping the bed sheet, I pushed my face against the mattress, biting my lower lip to restrain the sound.

“Sss….” I hissed, and the moment he left my hand, I turned to slap him with all my might.

His face jerked, with a little cut on his cheek caused by my ring, and he moved off me.

“How dare you?” I lunged at him, clutching his kurta[12], pushing him against the headboard. He had me fuming with anger.

“I can dare more. But dare you marry him, Nandani, and you will see my wrath,” He seethed, holding my wrists to push them off his collar. Looking into my eyes, he added, “Many would want to marry you. You can marry any man but him. Not him. Never.”

I stared deep into his raging, bloodshot eyes. “It is only him whom I will marry. I’ll let him touch me, do anything he wants to do to me in bed, and I will bear his child. And you'll not be able to do anything about it,” I said.

He sucked in a deep breath and nodded his head. “I have my eyes on you. You still have time to think about this, and if I ever, ever, ever catch you thinking about marrying him or see you anywhere near him again, you must bear the consequences,” he warned me.

“Get out! Get out of my life,” I yelled at him.

His knuckles whitened as he clenched his fists and walked towards the window.

My heart wrenched with fury as he paused and turned around to give an ultimatum before stepping over the window. “If you do not want me to do something, we both will regret it. Drop this plan, Nandani. This is no joke.” Turning back, he jumped out of the window.

“I will not,” I screamed confidently, running to the window, seeing him leaving. When he left, I closed the windows and walked to the mirror to see what he did to my back. I held my breath when my sight fell on a dark bruise forming right below my nape.

“I hate you,” I cursed under my breath and went to my bed to get some sleep.

The visuals of his actions kept running through my mind until I fell asleep.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

I woke up early the next day. It was Gangaur[13], and I had to keep a fast for my would-be husband. Both married and unmarried women celebrate this festival. Where married ladies pray for their husbands’ and family’s good health, unmarried girls observe this fast to get an ideal husband.

And there was a belief that if an unmarried girl looked at a man’s reflection in the still waters of a pond under the starry sky, that man would be her husband. So, I just had to see the King's face during the pooja[14] in the evening.

I bathed early in the morning and changed into a yellow lehenga.

I couldn't wear anything revealing, as he had marked my back the night before, so I opted for a covered blouse. While wearing all the jewelry, Suman helped me, and suddenly she asked, “Nandani, I don't think the king is a good man. Are you not scared of him?”

I looked at her in the mirror and answered, “Trust me, he is a good man. And don't worry about me,”

I went for the prayers, and when I returned, I stayed in my chamber the whole day since I was fasting.

In the evening, I prepared for the main pooja. My mother asked me to keep my face covered and sent me to the other side of the pond because the daughters wouldn't perform nuptial rituals in their father's presence.

My grandmother, a group of soldiers, and a few attendees accompanied me.

I knew the king would be there. The ritual was sacred and proven to confirm the wedding. My heart beat fiercely as I stepped down the stairs by the pond. I kept my prayer plate beside me and heard the footsteps of someone descending.

"The King has arrived," Suman whispered, and I started my prayers.

I let the sacred burning Diya[15] float onto the water. Closing my eyes, I was all set to see the king's reflection in the water. I knew he was standing two steps to the right of me.

I was about to open my eyes when an arrow flew at lightning speed out of nowhere towards the king. My gaze fell on Rudra's face in the water as he stepped forward to save the king, taking the arrow in his arm. "Ahh…."

Chaos erupted among the attendees, and the surrounding people began screaming at the sudden intrusion.

Rudra guided the king, "This way, your majesty." I saw the king leaving because of the sudden attack, and my lips wobbled, not believing I had just seen his face in the water.

I became furious and tried to find him. But the soldiers surrounded me immediately and asked me, "This way, Princess."

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The vision of his reflection in the holy water distraught me as I stumbled back into my chamber and settled on the bed.

My heart throbbed in fear of what I had witnessed earlier. I saw Rudra's face. It was supposed to be the King, but…. it was Rudra. Why? Why him?

The ritual was sacred and solemn. But he used it for his convenience, deliberately stepping forward to prevent me from looking at the king.

How could he? How dare he do that?

I clutched the bed cover in my hands when there was a loud knock on my door.

"Nandani," I heard my mother's voice, and I immediately brushed my tears away to open the door.

"Maasa," I acknowledged and saw her holding a food platter. Entering the chamber, she placed the platter on the table and said, "You should eat now."

Walking to the couch, I sat beside her. She made a morsel and brought it near my mouth to feed me. I took it silently when she said, "Nandani, you should think about it again."

I was on the verge of crying.

“Have you heard from Nand yet?” I asked about my twin brother.

She disappointingly shook her head.

“Nothing. Since he learned what Rudra did to you, he has secluded himself in the palace of Pratapgarh. The head commander sent a letter saying he didn't want to talk to anyone.” She explained and fed me another bite.

“So, how can I think about it again, Maasa?” I questioned and continued, “I was the reason why Abhinandan left us behind. He couldn't see me in pain and endure what happened to me. He thinks he's the cause of it all since he brought Rudra here. And this did not just break his trust, this broke him from the inside.” I explained how emotionally imbalanced my brother would have been.

“As I've already told you, maasa, Rudra is a quick-witted man. He is not the supreme commander of Suryagarh's army for no reason. I believe he, by now, must have started scheming to claim the throne. Let’s say he will not attack us, but Abhinandan will one day. He would want to kill Rudra at some point when he gets over his grief. That war is inevitable.” I spoke of the future crisis and continued, “And when that happens, I want to stand by my brother's side not as a weakness but as his strength, and my marriage to the King will strengthen us. If I bear his child, people will adhere to the queen even if anything happens to the King. At this point, it’s not about me or anyone else, but my brother. And for him, I don't want to have any second thoughts. The sooner the better,” she was in tears by the end.

“I don't know Nandani. I don't know what to do anymore. I've never been so helpless. Ever. On one side, it's you; on the other, it's your brother. You are both equal to me, although we cannot disregard your words. But, the price is too big, my child, we cannot afford it.” Her lips quivered as she let out how obligated she felt while holding my hand.

“The King is a gentleman, Maasa. What if he is old? At least, I'll be a queen and nobody will question my virtue. Because a king and his queen are powerful,” I justified.

“But your father? He will never let it happen,” she replied. I took a deep breath and requested, “You’ll have to convince him, Maasa. But make sure in the end you choose what is correct—a young man for your daughter or the life of your son and the safety of thousands of people of our empire.” Standing up, she closed her eyes, allowing the tears to drip down her face.

“That's tougher than death,” she stated, leaving my chamber. I wiped away my tears and retired for the night. Tomorrow was going to be a difficult day. I had to tell whom I would choose.

I didn't know how to convince my father, as he was impulsive and reactive. He has always chosen to act on his instincts instead of thinking them through. But I was no longer bothered about him; it was my brother who concerned me. My brother, who was in anguish and not in a state to fight a war.

With these thoughts lurking in my mind, I eventually drifted to sleep.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

I looked at myself in the mirror, inhaling sharply to gather all my energy. I prepared for the meeting in the palace hall. However, my trembling fingers and rapidly beating heart weren't helping my condition.

I placed the veil over my head and looked at Suman, who was waiting for me with the other attendees. "Shall we go?" Suman asked.

I nodded.

However, the visuals of everything that occurred in the last two weeks and during Gangaur kept blurring my mind repeatedly. So, I told them to give me privacy and sank into a chair.

"Nandani, are you okay?" Suman placed her hand on my shoulder and asked when all the other attendees left the chamber.

"I don't know, Suman," I palmed my face in dismay. She sat in front of me, holding my wrists gently. "What is this about?" She asked, moving my palms off my face. I looked at her.

"On one hand, I have my life, dreams, but shattered, trust but broken, and my dignity questioned. And, on the other hand, I have my family, its honour, and its pride that I've already ruined. I…want everything to be well-ordered now, no more drama, no more talks, and no more crazy things," I vocalised exhaustively.

Inhaling a deep breath, she said, "Don't worry, have faith in God. What's meant to happen will happen, no matter how much we deny it."

I pursed my lips and nodded, agreeing with whatever she said. "Do you want to stay longer? I mean, everyone must be waiting for you," she asked, and I just stared blankly at her.

I could see my life tumbling down—a marriage of convenience for political reasons and a mother's life ahead. I didn't know what to expect, but being a queen was better than marrying a young prince who would never respect me.

If the King knew about my affair, most probably everyone present for the swayamvar knew about it. On top of it, if I married a king from a small state, it meant allowing them to ask for favours. Therefore, it would be only right to get married in a progressive state.

After Rudra's betrayal, I lost all trust. Everyone, in my eyes, seemed like an impostor.

Suddenly, a soft thud caught my attention, as if someone had jumped into my chamber, so I turned to look towards the window. Rudra slipped in again, and I glanced at Suman, who stood terrified.

I stood up from the chair when he walked towards me.

"Ahh—" Suman screamed, but in a flash, he took out a dagger and placed it over her throat to threaten her. "Dare you speak a word, and I'll rip your throat. Understand?" Her eyes brimmed with tears as she squirmed in his hold.

“Rudra, leave her,” I warned him, reaching for his arm to shove him away. He looked at me furiously and said, “Tell her to stay quiet.”

“She will,” I quietly said. He left her and told her, “Get out.” She looked at me, horrified, and I nodded at her reassuringly.

Once she left, closing the door behind, I stormed towards him.

“What are you doing here, Rudra?” I asked, enraged upon seeing him, recalling his actions from the night before at the festival. He put his dagger back in its sheath before looking back at me.

“Giving you a chance to be wise and marry a man who will keep you happy. What you are doing now out of revenge will only hurt you,” he stated cruelly, and I held his collar. The tinkling of my bangles echoed in the chamber.

“Don't act like you care,” I snarled at him. He stepped closer and tried to touch me, but I swatted his hand away.

“Whatever happened, happened. Now, don't ruin your life on that old man. You don't even know him,” he said.

I pushed him away with all my strength. “I don't care, Rudra. I trusted you, and you slapped that right back on my face. The only purpose of my life now is to destroy you, the way you destroyed me.” I replied.

His eyes turned red as he marched fiercely toward me and pushed me against the dressing table, causing the few items on it to fall. Cupping my right cheek and lifting my chin to look into my eyes, he said, “I am not denying you from marrying anyone,” his voice was low and pleading. “But, not him, Nandani. You cannot marry my uncle and later become my aunt. It is equal to being a mother. You can't do that, considering our past,” I snickered at him.

“Past???” I scoffed, ridiculed by him. “What past? You did not feel anything for me, so there is no past.”

He tightened his hold on my cheek while his other arm wrapped around my waist, freezing me in place as he towered over me. “We spent a night together. You confessed your love to me,”

I burst out laughing hard. “Night? Are you, by any chance, talking of the night when nothing happened? I know you did nothing, and I can prove it.” He clenched his jaw and crept closer to my face.

“But in the eyes of the people, everything happened between us, and what if you are not able to prove anything?” I started trembling as I listened to his words, and the thought of him using me in my vulnerable state crossed my mind.

I gulped the huge lump down my throat. Holding my courage, I replied, “I will and trust me, you will just stand and watch.”

His breath fanned as his eyes scanned my face and at last lowered to my lips, which were quivering with the proximity. He inadvertently brushed my lower lip with his thumb, and my breathing became uneven, causing me to gasp.

“Ah…” A low moan slipped through my mouth as I felt his hand stroking my bare waist, gradually creeping towards the front.

“You will not marry anyone but him?” he questioned in a deep voice, and I looked at his lashes raking between my eyes and lips.

“Yes,” I made myself clear. He shook his head, inching his finger towards the hem of my blouse and brushing against the folds of my bosom.

“So you will be mine,” He mumbled, bringing his lips closer to mine.

“No, I will not,” I spat back and tried to wiggle out of his hold. I was alarmed as his lips were almost near mine.

“Yes, you will. And don't you dare create any drama out there, little would-be wife,” I froze hearing that.

Only when I felt his finger caress my midriff did I regain my senses and push him away forcefully. I met his furious and dominant gaze, glaring at me.

Breathing heavily, I said, “You had your chance, Rudra, and if you ever had a tad bit of, for the sake of that affection, just leave me alone!” He chuckled.

“No, it wasn't affection.” He jumped over the window. Once he left, I couldn't keep myself from crying.

Shortly after regaining my composure, I called for Suman. She rushed in, pushing the doors open with urgency.

Delicately clasping my arms, she asked in a distressed tone, “What did he say?” I smoothed my dress with my sweaty palms.

“Nothing, just spewing hot air,” and she frowned at me. “Let's go,” I said, pulling my veil. We both headed to the palace hall.

There was a massive shift in my emotional scale. I didn't feel nervous anymore; I felt determined. I gave myself entirely to him, but he shattered me. He knew that what he was doing would wreck my life, yet he chose to do it anyway. I couldn't forget how he challenged and ordered me after everything he did.

As I tread inside the palace hall, I could see everyone through my sheer veil, seated at their places. But as soon as their eyes landed on me, the hall buzzed with the hushed murmurs of the crowd. Some applauded, some looked amused, while I ambled towards the dais, where my father sat on the throne. I made myself comfortable on the couch placed right beside the throne.

I raked my sight around and spotted the king in the room.

The herald and my father made announcements. As my heartbeat pounded loudly in agitation, I became inattentive to whatever was being said. I snapped back to reality when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“It's time to let everyone know whom you’ve chosen as your husband,” my mother said, and I thought of my brother, our lively childhood, and the memories we made. The visuals of something happening to him crossed my mind, so I gathered all my courage and stood up. My mother joined me as I walked down the dais and looked at all the present suitors.

My heart ached knowing how every woman must go through this: selecting a man with whom she will spend her entire life, making babies and sharing everything. I have always dreamt of marrying the man I love because the thought of being in a loveless marriage terrifies me.

But in reality, loving a man became my most significant loss. I loved him with all my heart and chose him above everything, and now, when I look back, those thoughts nauseate me.

Love blinded me to the point that I couldn't see his true intentions. I couldn't decipher that he wasn't here for me, but to collect information about our Empire. I knew he was working hard to claim the throne, but I never considered why he truly wanted it so badly. He trampled our honour, pride, and emotions just to reach the throne.

And why did he do what he did? For revenge? To avenge his family and ruin us? Did promises matter to him more than consent?

My mother was promised to my father through my maternal uncle, which was purely a political arrangement. She was never consulted about it. What he did proves that, for him, the promise was far more significant than a woman's life and consent. He believed my parents were to blame for whatever happened to him.

Now, I find myself in the same situation my mother faced years ago. If we apply the same logic here, why is it that marrying an older man was acceptable for my mother but not for me? If marrying a manwhore was right for my mother, how could it be wrong for me?

I wanted to see how far he would go to stop me from marrying an old man.

Walking past all the men, I stopped a few steps away from the king.

Inhaling a deep breath, taming my tears and collecting all the courage I had left, I began, "I... Princess of Mahabaleshgarh, daughter of King Rajvardhan Mahabalesh and Queen Abhishree Mahabalesh… choose…The king of…. Suryagarh, King Surgami Dev Singh…as my husband."

As soon as I finished, the hall resonated with the chaos of astonished people.

"What??" I heard my father's shocked voice and looked up as he marched toward me. "Nandani…???" He held my hand and took me to a corner out of everyone's view.

"Why him?" He questioned angrily, and I pulled my veil up.

"Raj, calm down," my mother tried to appease him, but he seethed at her. "Calm down?! Can't you see, this girl has lost it." My blood ran cold as soon as he looked at me.

"Why him? There are so many men ready to take you as a wife, and you want that old cranky man as your husband," he gritted with a deadly glare.

I held my ground and answered, "Other men are not Kings and from a prosperous state."

He stepped closer, and I lowered my lashes anxiously. “Are you out of your mind? Since when did you start caring about wealth and status, Nandani?” I couldn't stop the tears from falling from my eyes, and I nervously uttered, “I am sorry, but I want to be a queen. I don't want to marry the kings of small states,” He palmed his face in annoyance and held my shoulder.

“Look at me, Nandani,” he said, and I did. “You see... wealth, titles, position, they don't matter after some point. The real wealth of life is happiness, not these materialistic things,” he explained seriously.

“But, who will love me after knowing what I did?” I asked.

“My little girl, any man will fall for you. You are my daughter, a precious gem. Tell me, how can someone not love you?”

Trails of tears soaked my cheeks as I said, “You are saying so because you are a father. But trust me, that's not the truth, and I’m no longer courageous enough to give this feeling a second chance. Now, I want to be on the safe side, for me, my life, and my family.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “What safe side are you talking about?” I blinked and looked at my mother for an instant. “King Surgami Dev Singh… He is the safe side for me, for my future, and for us,” I muttered back.

“How?” He questioned.

I gathered all my thoughts and reasoned, “If I marry him, I'll be a queen and able to help many people. You know I love spending time with people and doing something for them. Therefore, this title will enable me to continue serving the people. And he is an old man who wouldn't survive for long. I will be the queen; I will rule. And it will prevent Suryagarh from turning against us. This alliance will establish a correlation between the two states. Rudra will not be able to take the throne, which would prevent a war between Suryagarh and us, a war between him and Abhinandan—” he cut me off, amid,

“If war happens, I will kill him. What can a single man do to us?” I sighed exhaustively.

I desperately continued, “He is not alone, Baapusa. He is the head commander of Suryagarh’s army, and the soldiers follow him blindly. Because they believe he is the right successor for the throne.”

“Suryagarh has an invincible army. Rudra is a great soldier, and our Abhinandan does not deserve it. If one sacrifice will save thousands of lives, let's opt for it. And this is not the first time in history. Political marriages have happened before. Not every queen gets to walk on a bed of roses. Let's accept it. I created this mess, so please let me clear it.”

“The only way to clear this mess is to kill that man. Rudra,” He sharply exclaimed, and I facepalmed myself.

“No, it's not. Rudra is the deserving candidate until the King has his heir. If not for the king, who is still hopeful, the rest have already accepted Rudra as the king.

The soldiers listen to everything he says. If we kill him, it'll be a disaster. The royal army of Suryagarh will attack us, and possibly Surgami Dev Singh will also lead the war, as Rudra is the logical heir to their empire. Killing him is not the solution." I explained the depth of the situation, and he looked toward my mother.

"What has this girl eaten? Why is she talking like Gulaab? She is stubborn like you and acting like a fool." His frustration was obvious in his tone, and my mother agreed with me.

"She is right, Raj. We need to consider the broader perspective. We know there will be a war if Rudra becomes the King. The only way to stop him from becoming the King is to get a new heir for Suryagarh. A marriage alliance shall definitely do it. And, even if the King does not have an heir, Nandani will always have power and influence in making decisions as the queen," she calmly made him understand.

"As her mother, I know I must not have such thoughts, but I'm a mother to thousands of people, too, Raj. I can't let so many people die because of my selfishness. Your sister, too, married the Sultan for the sake of a promise, and I hope you remember the circumstances in which our marriage took place. My daughter is not weak; she is the strongest among us. A true queen," she said. Taking my side, she looked at me with faith.

My father sighed tiredly, letting his head fall in dismay. "You both have just shown how incapable I am." I shook my head and held his hand.

"You are not incapable. We are helpless, and I want to take the responsibility, please." He looked at me disappointedly.

"Do whatever you want. But this marriage will never have my approval. Now, you're a grown-up and have made your own decisions. Clearly, I am unworthy of making decisions. Only you and your mother are intelligent ones here," He said, patting my head, and I broke into sobs.

"But, Nandani, tell me one thing," He requested, and I looked at him.

"Yes," He held his breath and asked, "What happened between you two? I want to hear the truth from you."

My voice trembled as I whispered, "Nothing happened between us, Baapusa." Coming forward, he kissed my forehead.

"You can decide for yourself. I always allowed you to. But deep down, I hope you'll change your decision." I shook my head, symbolising that I wouldn't.

My mother reminded me, "We should go back. The guests are waiting."

"One more question, Nandani. Has Rudra ever tried to hurt you?" I turned my gaze to look at him and denied it. "No, he could do anything but hurt me."

He nodded and looked at my mother. "What's left to see the guests for? Everything is done, can't you see?"

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

My mother and I returned to my chamber.

Closing the door on her way inside, she asked me, “Nandani, are you sure my child?” She joined me as I sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m afraid he has nothing for you. What if he'll never love you?” She expressed her concern.

“I don't know, Maasa. But my heart believes he will love me. It's just a matter of time,” I replied, unsure.

Her moist eyes and the way her palms gripped the bed sheet visibly revealed her sense of helplessness.

“If it weren’t for the safety of Abhinandan and thousands of people, I would've never let you do this.” I softly held her hands in mine and made her look at me.

“Everything will be fine. Trust me. I know my choice can be worse sometimes, but not every time,” I chuckled to lighten the mood. She looked at me seriously, “But, what if it doesn't? What if what you are predicting might not happen?”

“It will, maasa. It has to. For me, for all of us... It will be difficult, but this is the only way,” I gently washed off her tears, and she gave a tired smile.

“Your father must be waiting for me. I should go and talk to him. If we want things to be in our favour, we need him on our side. And, I believe he understands our point of view somewhere,” she said.

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. “He asked you about what exactly happened between you two,” she reminded me, and I nodded for her to go on.

“And, knowing nothing happened, his anger subsided. You know how your father is. He supported your aunt, he supported me, and he will always support you. If Rudra had ever asked for your hand in marriage, he surely would have considered,” she finished, and I sighed.

“Let's not talk about him, Maasa.” Standing up from the bed, she kissed my forehead and muttered, “But you cannot overlook his care for you. I don't know his reasons for leaving you, but what if he thought that was the best for you?”

I closed my eyes and with a heavy heart said, ***“Vyakti ke chale jaane ke baad, uski chintaon ka koi mol nahi reh jaata, Maasa. Unke mann mein humaare liye kitni hi chinta kyun na ho, yadi wo humaara saath nahi de sakte toh ve chintaein vyarth hai, aisi chinta ka koi arth nahi,”*** (Once a person leaves us behind, his care stands of no value, maasa. No matter how much they are concerned for us, if they cannot support us when we need it the most, that concern is meaningless, there is no point of such care.)

She gently placed her hand on my shoulder. “All my life, I trusted people blindly, and suddenly a storm swept in and I couldn't trust anyone,” she began sharing her experience. “In my early twenties, I used to behave rebelliously; I became reckless. As I did not trust anyone, I made some absurd decisions too. But I learned everyone has a story to tell later in life.” She softly caressed my hair and emphasized. “We get so indulged in our problems, we start categorising people. Friends, enemies, acquaintances, well-wishers. It took me long enough to

understand that we must try to hear their side of the story before concluding. That is what a real king and a queen must do,”

Taking a deep breath and standing up from the bed, I compiled, “I know all of his side. And after knowing and understanding, I concluded that I'd never met someone as selfish as him. He didn't have to come into my life if he was going to leave.” Tears brimmed in my eyes, and heaving heavily, I expressed my grief to her with my hands.

“I collected all my trust, my love, my pride and handed it over to him. Despite knowing he is the son of our enemy, I thought he had gone through so much in his life that he needed someone to love him. But he proved that he was the son of his father. He took everything of mine and trampled it so easily, like it meant nothing. He did not do anything ‘with’ me, but he did everything ‘to’ me that cannot be forgotten.” I wept, my throat tightened with the weighing of grief.

“Immodest will be added before my name from now on. People will call me foolish for staking my everything in the name of love. It’ll now be written in the history of Indira that there was a nutty princess who served the pride of her empire to her enemies on a silver platter.” I broke down in tears.

My mother broke into sobs and hugged me. “It's not like that, Nandani. A person cannot be defined by their mistakes. People will always remember you for your kind heart and innocence. You know, the villagers are not even ready to believe the rumours. This is what you have earned. This is our true pride,” She patted my back, and I held on to her tighter, breaking into tears.

“And trust me, whoever did this will sew it,” She muttered. I didn't know why she was still hoping that I wouldn't marry the king and that Rudra would come and stop me from doing so.

“That will never happen, Maasa.” Freeing me from the hug, she said, “You are not a mother yet. A mother's instincts are always strong and real.”

I smiled at her belief and politely asked her to leave. “You shall retire to your chamber, Maasa. Baapusa must be waiting for you.”

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Two weeks passed in silence, pain, and the perplexity of what might happen.

Rudra didn't return, and I didn’t understand why his absence left me with an unfilled void in my heart.

A part of me wanted to believe that this was all a dream and that when I opened my eyes, nothing of this sort had happened. Unfortunately, this was the reality.

Finally, a moment of joy arrived in my somber life when my mother told me that my aunt and cousins had come to the palace. Their presence brought a smile to my face.

Ruhani, my cousin and my best friend. Growing up, we shared each moment of our lives in letters.

Although everyone was saddened by the events unfolding in the palace, the decorations and preparations continued in full swing. My father took charge of everything by himself.

At my request, no one informed my brother about any of this. If he knew what was happening here, I knew he would come back and do something we might all regret.

I covered my head with the dupatta and ran towards the main entrance, with Suman following me. As we passed through the royal gardens, I screamed at her in a merry voice, “Come, fast!”

She giggled heartily, “Nandani, stop.”

She tried to catch me, but I reached the entrance before her, where my family awaited the guests. I looked at my grandmother, waiting desperately to meet her dearest daughter, Ruhani's mother, sister of my father, my Gulaab Buaa[16].

Finally, huge trumpets were blown to announce their arrival, and the attendees began showering rose petals upon their sight. My aunt and uncle walked towards us, followed by Ruhani and her husband, Ruhani's brother Haider, and another girl I didn't recognize.

My heart leapt with absolute delight as I looked at everyone. My father laughed in immense joy as my buaa came closer to him.

“Pranaam[17] Bhaisa[18],” She greeted him with adjoined hands, and he collected her in a warm hug. Both of them broke down in tears of happiness. Looking at them, I realised how close they were despite the literal distance between them.

“How are you, Gulaab?” He asked her.

“I’m good, Bhaisa, very good. I missed you a lot,” She said, moving from the hug and wiping off her tears.

“How are you?” she asked, and he replied with a smile, “As the same as you left me.” She chuckled, and Ruhani's father stepped forward.

“Raja Sahab, aapki behen aapko bilkul yaad nahi karti,” (Raja Sahab, your sister doesn't miss you at all.) My father chuckled, hearing him, and they both shared a hug, patting each other’s shoulders. Releasing the hug, they looked at each other, amused.

“Gulaab, hum abhi bhi keh rahe hai, Humein ye vyakti kuch thik nahi lagta,” (Gulaab, I’m telling you, there is something still wrong with this man). My father teased him, and my Buaa put on a false show of crying.

“Bhaisa, don't say that,” and their laughs reverberated. My mother forged ahead with the Aarti ki thaali[19] and looked at my father.

“Stop teasing my sweet Nanad[20],”

“Bhabhisa[21],” my aunt screamed in glee, and my mother laughed. She then began circling the aarti ki thali in front of them as a gesture of their welcome and handed

over the plate to an attendee. My mother bent forward to touch my aunt's feet out of respect, but my aunt stopped her midway.

“We must hug, Bhabhisa.” They both hugged each other. Once they were done greeting each other, my aunt walked over to my grandmother, who took her in the warmest of embraces. As I looked at them all teary, I turned emotional, recalling my grandfather, who was no more.

“How are you, Maasa?” My grandmother choked back her tears and kissed her on the cheek.

“As young as a teenager to see my daughter happy,” my uncle stepped forward to meet my grandmother and kissed her hand. He then came closer to hug her like a son. ***“Rakh lijiye, Maasa, apni beti to kuch din apne paas rakh lijiye,”*** (Keep her, Maasa, keep your daughter with you for a few days) he said.

My grandmother laughed at his words and replied, ***“Aapki dharohar hai aap hi sambhaalein, jamai sa. Hum to kanyadaan kar chuke hain,”*** (She's all yours to take care of, Jamai sa.. We have already fulfilled our duty)

He smiled and asked in a loving tone, “How is your health now?” She nodded and answered, “Better…Nandani takes care of me, but now she is leaving too.” I stepped forward to meet my aunt and uncle.

“Pranaam Phuphasa[22],” I greeted him. He placed his hand on my head and blessed me. My aunt, too, hugged me.

“Pranaam, Buaasa,” She patted my back affectionately. “God bless you. How are you now?” I smiled, moving away,

“I am doing well,” she cheerfully exclaimed. “We have a surprise for you.” I frowned when she called for Ruhani. I saw her come and stand in front of me.

Suddenly moving her mouth, she spoke, “Nandani.” My eyes bulged out, and my heart paused briefly in immense shock.

“What?” She came closer to hug me, and I hugged her back, my lips stretching into the widest smile.

“Congratulations on your wedding, Nandani. Who is the lucky man?” She asked, and I released myself from the hug, still in disbelief. She could speak?!

Our attention was caught by the voice of my phuphasa, who was talking to my father.

“Raja sahab, you've met Ruhani and Haider. Now, meet a new addition to our family, Sultan Aahil, Ruhani’s husband.” He stepped forward hesitantly and greeted my father.

“Assalamualaikum, Raja sah—I mean Maamujaan[23],” I looked at Ruhani, who went to stand beside him. “Pranam, Maamujaan,” she greeted him, and my father took both of them together in his embrace with relish.

“Ahaa…. God bless you both.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

My parents personally assisted everyone with their chambers after the welcome. Meanwhile, I pulled Ruhani into my chamber, and we hugged like never before.

“How did you get your voice back?” I screamed, my eyes wide with ecstasy. Inhaling deeply, she looked at me with her doe-like eyes.

“Long, long story,” she said, teasing, “Who is the lucky man?” I planted a faint smile on my face and replied, “That’s a surprise for you.” She pouted, “I hate surprises.” She whined and sat beside me on the bed.

“So, love or arranged marriage?” she asked in excitement, and I looked at her with a heavy heart.

“Complicated,” I answered. She chuckled, furrowing her brows, “What?”

“Yeah, I mean, many suitors travelled here from different states, and I had to choose one of them. So, it's neither love nor arranged. Everything is my choice, but taking into consideration the betterment of the empire,”

“You love him, right?” She asked.

I blinked at her blankly. I wanted to tell her everything, but part of me wasn’t ready to do so. The more I tried to dig into it, the more complicated it became. The groom was just old and simple.

“It is a political wedding, Ruh,” Her smile dropped as soon as she heard me. She looked at me, astounded.

“What? A political marriage? Why? And what about the man you love?” She asked, and I turned away to calm my racing heart. Closing my eyes, I braced myself to tell her the truth.

“He left me, and now everyone knows that I had an affair with someone.” She immediately made me look at her.

“What's happening here? I hope this wedding is happening with your consent,” She asked doubtfully, and I held her hand.

“Of course. But it's just not with the man I loved. He left me nothing,” I said.

She turned upset and hugged me. “He did not deserve you, Nandani,” She said, and I smiled, nodding at her.

A loud knock on my door caught our attention.

“Who is it?” I asked, and the attendee from behind the door responded.

“Sultan Aahil is asking for Begum[24] Ruhani,” I teasingly squinted at Ruhani. “Come on, your Sultan is asking for you.” She giggled, and I teased her more. “Tell me how your first time was,” she blushed and told the attendee, “Ask him to wait.”

“So, how was it?” I asked, scooting closer. With a flushed face, she looked down. “What?”

“Stop blushing, I want to know the details,” I insisted, and she looked at me with a wide smile. “It was wild,” I arched my brow. “Wild, huh… Really?” I squeaked.

“Yes. We were in the garden and it was raining heavily that night. He was upset about something. I went to console him, and we got so indulged that it just happened.” She was a blushing mess by the end of her revelation. I was shocked.

“In the middle of the garden? Quite a show for the onlookers,” I commented with my mouth wide open, and she chuckled.

“Oh no, no. It was a private garden, isolated, so it just happened smoothly,” she said. I cleared my throat and gushed, “Well, however smooth it was, just imagining it is hair-raising.”

Giving a benign smile, she said, “Well, you see, Nandani, when it is the right person, you don't care about anything. That's what happened to me. At that moment, I was so much surrounded by him, nothing else mattered,” she placed her hand on my cheek lovingly. “And trust me, when you have someone like that, it'll happen to you, too.” I sighed dejectedly, hearing her words.

Deep down, I knew nothing of that sort would happen to me. But a part of me instantly thought of Rudra listening to her.

“You're right. But now I think you should go to meet your Sultan. He must be waiting for you,” I said.

“Alright,” she hugged me standing up, and I bid her adieu for the night. Once she left, the attendees closed the doors, and I lay on my bed.

With each passing second, my life grew increasingly complex. Only a week remained before my wedding, and I looked at my hands, trembling with anxiety. Soon they'd be adorned with henna, but with someone else’s name. All the things I wanted to do for him, with him, I was now going to do for some other man.

Tears pooled in my eyes as old thoughts haunted my mind. The conversations, the laughter, the secret meetings we had—everything felt perfect, yet my heart wasn't ready. It asked again and again, what went wrong with our love?

After all that happened, my mind persistently lingered on thoughts of him, drowned. It felt as if my body walked past him, but my soul remained attached to him, in his arms, feeling his warmth, refusing to leave his hold.

My insides mourned for what my heart was enduring because of my mind. I wish he had come to me and told me, for him, with him, all the things I would have ended. I would have cried, would have fought, but had he given me an explanation, I might’ve understood.

I would have left him, smiling while holding his hand, for him, with him over my heart, I would have walked. But now my morals wouldn’t allow my soul to remain in his embrace any longer. They pulled my soul from his hold, ripping it away, and it shattered.

Moment by moment, it shattered.

Growing up, I dreamed of a perfect life, but those dreams didn’t matter. I did not know how many girls had gone through it. How many girls suffer this pain—the

pain of forcibly overcoming an emotion and living with the ultimate reality for all their lives?

I wasn't bleeding, there wasn't a single cut on my body, but the pain was indescribable, like someone was scraping my heart with a knife.

Lying there on the bed, I didn't know when I fell asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of footsteps. Sitting up in bed, I looked around the chamber. A few lamps had run out of oil, making the room partly dark.

“Who is it?” my voice echoed as I stepped out of bed.

Suddenly, someone pulled me, and in a panic, I was about to scream. But before I could, a palm was placed over my mouth, and I looked into the intruder’s eyes.

His eyes. Even in the dim lighting and darkest of nights, I could recognise him, with his smell, his touch, his engulfing presence.

He pushed me against the bedpost, and I held onto his wrists, detaching his hand from my mouth. I glared at him angrily, but his gaze softened.

“Why are you doing this, Nandani?” He asked in an agonising tone. I drew in a deep breath.

“Baagee samajhte hai aap?” (Ever heard of a rebel?) I asked, and he looked at me blankly. ***“Vo ban gaye hain hum,”*** (I’ve become that.) I said, and he held my cheek.

With his cold hand, he pulled me closer. His breathing was fast and wild. He questioned, looking at me. “How do I stop you?” I blinked and shook my head in disappointment.

“Kitna saral hai na aapke liye. Humaara jeevan dhwast karne ke pashchaat mol poochne chale aaye. Kaise rukenge hum? Haina, kitna saral,” (How easy it is for you. After destroying my life, you have come for negotiations. How will I stop? See, how easy is that?) Tears brimmed in my eyes as rage built within me, looking at him. “May I know at what price you sold me?” I asked.

He sucked in a heavy breath and pulled my face closer to his.

“I cannot marry Nandani. I cannot become anyone's husband, and I cannot bear a child,” he said, and the world stopped before me. His words paralysed my form.

“What?” I asked, and he nodded.

“It's not about any other girl. It was just about you. I was playing with you; I was just... using you for my plans,” he disclosed. “But... but that night I just couldn't do it anymore. I just…. I don't know. But please, it is hurting me, so please don't do this. Everything will become complicated. I’m not asking you not to get married at all. You have all the rights to be happy, but that man will never give you the happiness you deserve,” he pleaded, and tears trailed down my face.

“That's it? And, since when did you start caring about my happiness?” I asked. He looked at me, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Moving his hands from my cheeks to my waist, he slowly pulled me closer, and I felt him leaning into the scruff of my neck. He engulfed me in a hug, and I broke down in tears.

"Sab samaapt ho gaya hai ab, Rudra." (It's all over now, Rudra.) He tightened his hold and lifted me effortlessly. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he placed one hand on my head.

"You deserve to be happy, Nandani. It was not your fault. I'm sorry that I included you in this dirty game of politics," I broke into intense cries upon hearing his words. He then said, "Please change your decision. We cannot be on opposite sides." I pulled away from the hug.

Taking a deep breath and controlling my tears, I said, "I will become the Queen of Suryagarh. You do what you are at best. Run away…. like always,"

His eyes darkened with anger, while his grip on me tightened. His hand scraped from my waist to my hand, and he drew my face closer to his. It felt warm and fuzzy.

"You know, it is never going to happen," he said, and my whole body trembled as I looked at his lips inching closer to mine. I stared blankly into his eyes.

"Nandani!" He placed his lips over mine.

"Nandani, open the door," He sucked on my lower lip passionately and whispered,

"I love you, little wife,"

"Nandani, open the door," panicking, I jolted awake, sitting upright on the bed. I looked around, gasping heavily for air. My heart beat rapidly when I heard loud banging at my door.

"Nandani!" Massa's loud calls made me realise it was all a dream—a nightmare, to be precise.

He wasn't here. He did not come last night.

"Open the door, Nandani," She screamed, and I placed my hand on my chest to calm myself down.

"Yes, Maasa," I hurried out of bed and rushed to the door. Opening it, I saw my mother, aunt, and Ruhani dressed up.

"It's your Haldi[25] and you're late," my aunt reminded me, and I plastered a smile over my face.

I hate you, Rudra.

"Haldi. Yeah… yes, I know…I remember," I spoke falteringly, distracted by the repercussions of the dream. My Buaa smiled, and I looked at the grim expression on Ruhani's and my mother's faces.

"I'll help her get ready." Ruhani stepped forward, getting inside the chamber. Once my mother and aunt left, handing me the attire for the haldi ceremony, Ruhani closed the door behind me and walked towards the couch.

Taking a seat, I groaned, holding my head, throbbing awfully in pain.

“What happened?” She asked.

“I think I’m going insane,” I grumbled, and she looked at me confused.

“What?” I palmed my face because I didn't know what it was.

I could still feel like he was here, right in front of me. It felt so real, so vivid, but then suddenly the door banged and I… ughh…

What the heck was that? It did not seem like a dream, or had I started hallucinating?

My head was hurting. I couldn’t sleep well, as I kept thinking about everything the whole night. And a few things I remember were the ‘kiss’ and him calling me his ‘little wife’. I couldn't comprehend anything else.

“Are you alright, Nandani?” Ruhani asked, and I looked at her.

“Yes, I think. I mean... I need to take a hot bath,” I stood up, moving towards the bathroom, when she offered, “Alright, let me help you.” We both moved toward the bathroom.

She seemed a little sad about the instances, and to cheer her up, I asked, “So, how wild was it last night?” She blushed at my question, and I smiled in satisfaction.

“Tell me,” I moved toward the pool, taking off my clothes when I noticed a blood stain on my skirt.

He was here the night before!

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

Once I finished my duty, I returned to working on my plan. I needed to resolve everything with only six days left before the wedding. The more people I had on my side, the better it would be.

Because that girl had gone insane and wasn't heeding my words, I wouldn't have prevented her from marrying. She had every right to happiness, but she chose the wrong man—my uncle.

I understand she was angry about my actions, and she had every right to feel that way. However, her anger was now blocking my path. I had several reasons to stop her from marrying my old uncle.

First, she would be the biggest obstacle in my path to the throne because she was a liberated and strong-willed girl. Somewhere, I sensed that she was aware of my master plan, which explained her sudden decision to marry. She knew that if she married my uncle, she would gain power, and her standing against me would weaken me.

Next, I loved my Badi-Maa, one of my uncle’s wives, and I didn't want anything she wouldn't like, especially another bride for her husband.

In addition, I deplored the sight of her ruining her life. I had begun to care for her. Yet, I left her because I couldn't love any woman until I became the king.

I had many purposes, and loving someone was definitely not one of them. My life demands sacrifices from me. I had to leave her because of my growing feelings for her. I didn't want to see her suffer the pain of being with me.

I wasn't sure if I would become the king or if I'd ever have a good life. So, how could I have promised to live with her and bring her to my small cottage to struggle alongside me? She was a princess and deserved to be a queen, not the wife of a servant. But it was wrong of me to toy with her feelings.

I knew from the beginning that I could neither love nor become intimate with a girl, nor bear a child, because I was bound—bound by the promise I made to my mother on her deathbed to become a great king.

I wandered through the palace searching for my target, and finally, my gaze fell upon a familiar face: Haider.

Well, my friendship with Abhinandan brought many benefits, one of which was getting to know all his family members and relatives.

Haider was Abhinandan's cousin, and I had met him once. He enjoyed drinking, which I planned to use to my advantage, as I could connect with his father and Ruhani's husband through him.

Ruhani was Nandani's cousin, whom she often talked about. She once mentioned her wedding to a powerful Sultan in one of her letters to me. I needed to

incorporate such people in my plan to lessen the enemies. I had to turn them on my side as soon as possible.

“Haider,” I called out as he walked through a corridor. He was surprised to find me there and narrowed his eyes at me. “Rudra, Abhinandan's friend. We met two years ago,” I reminded him, and he nodded, recognizing me.

“Oh, yes, yes, Rukra! How are you?” he asked, opening his arms to hug me.

Patting his shoulder, I replied, “I am all well. What about you?” Scratching his head, he looked at me.

“Well, I’m in a little trouble right now,” He said worriedly. So I asked about it. “My brother-in-law, Aahil, such a drunkard he is. I'm trying to find a good place to grab some drinks and have fun, you know,” He filled me in with the information, and I nodded.

“Yeah, why are you here? By the way? Oh, yes, you’re invited too, of course. You are Abhinandan's friend. Nandani is like your little sister,” he said, and I instantly tapped his shoulder, trying not to smack his face flat.

“Haha… ” *Such scatterbrained relatives*. I tried to laugh it off. “Nandani is not like my sister. Not at all,” I gritted with a sweet smile, and he frowned, unsure.

“Oh,” He uttered, and I took my hand back.

“Well, I can help you with the drinks and other stuff. What do you want?” I asked in a friendly tone and he said, “Uhmm, nothing special. I have the drinks, but if you could arrange a Hookah[26] for me, it'd be a welcome addition,” I nodded.

“Alright, consider it done,” I said, and he looked at me dubiously.

“So…. will you send it to my chamber?” he asked, and I assured him. I will,” I confirmed.

Pleased, he patted my shoulder, whispered, “Perfect,” and walked away.

He wasn’t of any use for my mission. I had to find the Sultan, Nandani’s cousin’s husband. I just wanted to ensure I had fewer swords pointing against me on the wedding day.

I thought of going back to Suryagarh. So, I sneaked out when the king was asleep because he’d create an unnecessary scene if he didn't find me around.

I wanted to meet Nandani, but it wasn’t of any use at the moment. Though for once, I at least wished to see her. But, before that, I had to arrange a hookah for Haider.

I walked toward the back of her chamber and craned my neck above to look up at her window two floors above. Like every time, I had to climb on the wall. It was midnight, and I jumped into her chamber over the window.

In the light of a few lit lamps, I walked toward her bed, and my sight fell on her sleeping figure.

As I staggered near, I found her shivering. Unfolding the comforter, I adjusted it over her form and settled on the edge of the bed near her.

She looked serene, and her angelic face and rosy, pouted lips looked beautiful as I watched her sleep calmly. I couldn't control my hands from touching her delicate petals.

“You are beautiful,” I muttered under my breath. Her eyelids fluttered, wrinkling tighter. She must be dreaming of something.

“Why are you doing this, Nandani?” I pleaded almost inaudibly to her.

I remembered the first time I saw her. To my eyes, she was the most enchanting, intelligent and tenacious girl. Her sharp wit always attracted me.

The most tempting thing was that she was secretly getting tutored on seduction in her palace. She managed to get herself a teacher who used to come to the palace disguised as a maid and teach her.

She flinched in her sleep, and I scooted a little closer to her, caressing her cheek. “Calm down, it's just a bad dream, little bird,” I spoke hushedly. She shivered, and I understood what it was.

Her menstruation was close, and she was having vivid dreams.

Her body would become numb during this time, and with the onset of her menstruation, she would start feeling sick and experience nightmares. She would often faint and always had trouble sleeping peacefully.

I held her hand and looked at her face marred with fear.

“I am sorry. I know you must have been dreaming about me and everything that happened. But trust me, I didn't want any of it to happen to you, I didn't want to taint your character. However, I had to leave because I couldn't get married. I cannot become anyone's husband,” I explained in a hoarse tone, looking at her, sensing that she was listening to everything.

“I regret returning to use you as a pawn again in my game, but looking at your face, I just couldn't. I did not have the heart to touch or do anything to you. However, it is hurting me, so please refrain from doing it anymore. Everything will get so complicated,” I mumbled, sliding her loose hair locks off her face.

I couldn't stop myself from pecking her hand. Her brows pulled up together, her cheeks too hot.

Leaning in, I gently kissed her forehead and promised never to let her marry an old man—especially my uncle. I stood up to leave before anyone caught me. After seeing her, I went back to my Kingdom, Suryagarh.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Another four days passed, spent guarding the king. A part of me wanted to discuss backing out of the wedding, hoping he would understand. But I knew a womaniser like him would never step back from having a girl like Nandani.

She, very diligently, managed to pull the right strings to get me infuriated by marrying my enemy.

The next four days, each moment passed in excruciating agony, causing a strong turbulence in my heart. I felt a strange pain inside just thinking about the consequences I would face if she were to marry my uncle. For example, I might gain the kingdom, become the king, and avenge my father's death with her family, but at what cost?

On one side, I had Nandani standing against me; on the other, everything awaited me. It was as if she had presented me with only two options. Either drop the plan of getting the throne because she had determined to marry my enemy and produce him an heir, or stop her from getting married by... marrying her.

But to confirm what was going through her mind, I had to meet her and see her reaction. I could not force her until I knew what she felt for me.

Only two days remained before her wedding. And so, after everyone slept, I emanated from my empire to meet her.

After arriving there at midnight, I entered the royal garden through a secret passage and then came to the back of her chamber.

I looked around once for anyone, and found the way clear. As I was halfway up the wall, a commanding voice stopped me in my tracks.

“What are you doing?” And, before I could even look down to see who it was, the person quickly climbed up and dragged me down to the ground.

We both fell with a loud thud, and just when he was about to punch me, I shielded my face and pushed him away.

“What the heck are you doing here? Who are you? And, why were you climbing the wall?” He interrogated in a threatening voice and pulled out his dagger. I surrendered myself and showed him both my hands.

“I come with peace, you see no weapon, no armour.”

He scanned me from head to toe and asked, “Who are you?”

I took a deep breath and looked at the young man before me. Well, he had a good physique and a charming face.

“I am Rudra,” I introduced myself. Realisation hit him and he took his dagger away.

“I’m Aahil, Ruhani's husband, Ruhani is Nandani's cousin,” he said, stepping closer. “Haider told me about you a few days ago,” I smiled at him. “But why were you climbing the wall? And whose chamber is that?” he asked, pointing towards the window.

“Nandani's. I was climbing over to meet her,” I explained, keeping my hands on my hips, and he arched his eyebrow at me.

“Why?” I geared up to tell him the reason.“Long story short. I betrayed her, and now she is angry and getting married to my eighty-year-old uncle to teach me a lesson. And, I don't want that to happen,”

“What?!?” He looked at me, dumbfounded. “Eighty years old? Eww…” He said, making a face.

“So, you want to make it up to her and have her agree to marry you?” he asked me. I thought for a moment and replied, “Yes, I will have to marry her if she doesn't give up on this absurd plan.” He narrowed his gaze.

“And, how will you do that? I mean, everyone is here. Her father, her brother, my father-in-law, brother-in-law and probably me, we all might kill you if you try to spoil the wedding,” He alerted me in a threatening tone, and I crossed my arms over my chest sarcastically.

“Of course, you all will run after me to kill me, but will not for once try to make her understand that what she's doing is wrong,”

Yet he spoke in her favour after a momentary silence, “Maybe she has her reasons, and how can she trust you when you betrayed her?” He questioned, and I took a deep breath.

“Ever heard of ‘second chance’?” I asked, and he stared at me for a few moments.

“Of course, but are you sure the girl will be happy with you?” He asked and I smiled.

“She will. Her anger towards me is so devastating, I wonder how much she loves me,” I said, and he nodded, pursing his lips.

“You are right. But what are you going to do?” I stared at him blankly for a few seconds and replied. “Kidnapping!” he lifted his eyebrows with a smirk, clicking on his tongue.

“Interesting,”

“So….are you ready to help me?” I asked. He pondered silently, and my sight fell on the side of his neck, a visible purple mark.

“You must know how much love can mean to someone,” I said, looking back at him, and he nodded.

“Of course, I know, young man.” he took a few steps back, saying, “I will make my decision once I get to know you.” I smiled, nodding at him.

“Sure.”

Turning back, he left, and I returned to climbing the wall.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

My Buaa applied haldi, a fragrant paste made from turmeric mixed with various herbs, on my cheeks.

Sitting in the palace hall on a Bajot—a low stool—I looked at the ladies gathered for my haldi ritual. I was surrounded by everyone, yet my mind was immersed in thoughts of the previous night.

He was indeed there. I wasn’t dreaming. I wasn't wholly hallucinating; it was due to my menstruation. He was there; I talked to him. But was the kiss real?

I couldn't fully cast my mind back, but a part of me wanted it to be real, while my sensible side just wanted to move on, thinking about my brother, who by now had probably been planning to wage a war against him over time.

A cold touch on my arms jolted me out of my contemplation, and I turned to my aunt, who was applying the haldi to my hands and feet. At last, she spread it over my forehead and blessed me with a gentle kiss.

All the affection and adoration from my family made me emotional. The closer we got to the wedding day, the more jittery I felt. Suddenly, the thought that I would soon get married overwhelmed me.

Later, my mother applied haldi in the same manner and pecked my forehead, causing me to smile wholeheartedly.

Despite men not being allowed at the ceremony, by the end, my father arrived to apply the paste and touched my feet.

All his life, he treated me like a goddess, and on every auspicious occasion, he bowed at my feet. However, his actions made me feel so puny.

How could I do that to my parents? They were considerate and protective and everything I could ever ask for, but I forsaken them for a man who, in the end, played me false.

I looked at him tearfully when he gave an encouraging smile.

“Don't worry; soon everyone will turn yellow,” he said, and I chuckled as he collected a handful of paste and slowly approached my mother, who was hiding behind my grandmother.

“Raj, you're a grown-up now. What will the children think of you?” My grandmother shrieked at him, and everyone guffawed.

“I’m still young at heart, Maasa,” he said, running behind my grandmother to catch her.

He applied the paste all over her cheeks, and she glared at him angrily. Sitting down, she gathered a handful of paste and smeared it on his face. I laughed at them both, still loving each other so deeply, and then broke down in tears.

My mother told me that my father hated her very much at first. However, when he found out that she was going to marry Rudra's father, he became furious. He ultimately ended up marrying her, a decision he later regretted despite the fact that they eventually fell in love. As a result, they got married again, performing all the rituals with everyone's consent and in their presence.

“Abhi!” He mischievously glanced at her and then at my aunt. He filled nearly all the paste in his palms and smeared it on my aunt's cheeks.

“Bhaisa,” she screeched, and with the intention of doing the same to him, she too took haldi in her hands. But before she could reach him, he stormed away. However, my mother blocked his way to allow my Buaa to get her revenge.

Meanwhile, Ruhani stepped closer to apply haldi to me. She called all the girls to sit around me and covered every inch of my exposed skin with the paste. Once my father left, she applied it to my back, neck, and face as well, gently scrubbing it all over with her hands. She then removed it with the help of oil. While doing so, I also applied haldi to her. All of this continued until late in the afternoon.

Ruhani and her mother later poured all the milk over my head, emptying the pot, followed by water. I was then asked to take a bath, after which I was not allowed to step out of my chamber.

Raksha dora—a holy thread—would be tied around my wrist to keep evil energies away from the bride.

After taking a bath, I had dinner and lay on my bed. It was a really long day, and it would continue to be the same until the wedding. The following days were spent in Haldi with a lot of fun. My parents were always trying to cheer me up.

I noticed love bites on Ruhani's neck, and when I met her husband, I saw one on his neck as well. It seemed they were enjoying their time here.

My father was having a good time with Ruhani's father, and my mother seemed happy spending time with my aunt.

However, this one couple was often absent. Haider and his fiancée.

The man appeared smitten, and Ruhani told me everything that had happened. She shared how she regained her voice and recounted her experiences to me.

Listening to her, I felt that my pain was nothing compared to what she had experienced. However, she was fortunate to have Sultan in her life. Based on what she shared with me, I could tell that he loved her deeply.

On the fourth day of Haldi, after applying the haldi, I took a bath and had my meal.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, my heart, as it always did, began to imagine things that were as impossible as predicting the future.

A part of me was troubled because the King was going to send a physician to test me, and I wasn’t sure if Rudra did it.

Another part of me couldn't help but think about Rudra. I was in a predicament about how we would face each other after the wedding.

As aunt and nephew? Just the thought of it was unnerving.

I suddenly heard a sound as I tried to fall asleep.

Not Again!

I positioned myself to look toward the window, where I spotted him. But he looked… different.

When I focused on him, I noticed that he had trimmed his beard and was wearing black attire. Strangely, he did not have his armor on and wasn't carrying a sword or dagger either—just plain clothes.

“Not again,” I grunted as he sauntered towards my bed and stood before me.

“Seems like someone’s missing me,” He teased slowly, and I sneered at him.

“I’m not in the mood for an argument. We shall meet in Suryagarh after the wedding,” I said, and he smiled at my remark before settling himself on the bed beside me.

Our eyes locked for an endless moment, lulled by the silence as if nothing had transpired in the past few days.

He gently cradled my hand, which was placed over my stomach. Bringing it closer to his nose, he inhaled the fragrance of haldi and sandalwood and whispered, “Smells nice.” I just stared at his inexpressive face as he asked quietly, “Have you ever thought about how we would face each other living in the same place? While guarding the king's chamber, I’ll have to see you sleeping with him, waking up with him, and helping him with his thousand imbecilic things.” Tears blurred my vision as I heard his despairing tone.

“I was ready to live with you in a small cottage, but... it doesn't matter anymore,” I said. Hot trails of tears slipped through my eyes. He intently tried to peck my hand, taking it near his lips, but before he could, I snapped my hand away from his hold. “This is wrong. I will be your aunt for the next two days. Please, just leave.”

He chuckled and held my hand again to get me out of bed.

“Come here,” He walked me towards the mirror, and I jerked his hand away. “You should leave, Rudra.”

He glowered at me, stepping closer. “You’re not listening to me, so why should I listen to you?” he asked, and I swallowed nervously.

The rage in his eyes was different. It wasn't alarming; instead, it was calm, like a warning before the storm—the storm for which I had to brace myself to face any consequence.

I stepped back, but he engulfed me, plopping onto the chair before the dressing table. Pulling me closer, he set me down on his lap.

I writhed in his hold, but he tightened the clasp on both my hands with one hand and pulled the dupatta off my shoulder with the other.

“Rudra, this is wrong,” I tried to say, looking into his eyes and making an effort to move away from his lap. But he was more muscular and stronger than I was.

“It feels right to me,” He said and tied my wrists behind me.

“Ah…” I whimpered in pain when he pulled the ends of the dupatta, ensuring the firmness of the knots. “This is wrong, you cannot do this with me,” I emphasised again, but he cupped my nape and pulled my face closer to his.

“Do you dream of sleeping with the king?” He asked.

I grimaced at him. “Shut up, Rudra,” I whispered warningly.

“Now, this is what I call wrong. You marry the king, but deep down you fantasise about me.” He said. Our faces were just inches away, at even heights, as I was perched on his thighs. I watched him scoop haldi paste from the bowl into his palm.

“Rudra, please, this is not right,” I said, tilting my head at him, my lips trembling, and he looked sharply into my eyes.

“I have every right to apply Haldi to the would-be Queen of Suryagarh,” he decisively muttered, smearing the cold paste all over my cheeks. His touch left me speechless with moist eyes, so I turned my lashes south.

“Hum toh aapke naam ki Haldi aur Mehendi lagaane ko sajj the, Rudra. Kintu aap humein cchodkar chale gayein. Jab cchodkar chale gaye toh laute kyu aur lautna hi tha toh gaye hi kyun?” (I was willing to perform every marriage ritual in your name. But you left me. If you were to leave, why did you return and if you were going to return, why would you leave in the first place?) I said.

He clenched his jaw, inhaling a deep breath, and applied it to my other cheek. ***“Ye kiske naam ki hai, Nandani?”*** (And of whose name is this one, Nandani?) He asked, and I looked into his eyes, which were filled with a vehemence so strong that it had me shuddering.

“You can fool the world, not yourself. Play a good princess all you want to the people, but instinctively, you know who you belong to,” he exclaimed, paralyzing me with how certain he was of his words. Listening to him, my ability to reason suddenly weakened.

As his fingers, at a slow pace, progressed towards my neck, I felt my insides stirring at his touch. I gasped heavily for air, closing my eyes, when his fingertips raked over my most sensitive part: my collarbones.

“Rudra, this is wrong. You cannot touch me, please…I’m to marry someone else in two days,” I feebly pleaded.

Opening my eyes, I blinked timidly when I found him leaning closer to the side of my neck. And, when his lips grazed the curve of my neck, a wave of sparks passed profusely through my spine.

He slowly deepened the touch, his warm tongue flickering over my skin as he began sucking me. “Rudra, please... this is wrong,” I begged, but I didn't know why; my body reacted in contradiction to my words.

He was so close to me that my nipples stiffened at the proximity. My head tilted back and lips parted, when he glided the blouse off my shoulder to apply the paste

on the other collarbone.

On one hand, he was torturing my neck with his lips, and on the other side, his hands had me shivering under his touch. It was so intense, I could feel goosebumps all over my skin.

“Ah…” he sucked me harshly, making me whimper in pain.

I wriggled to get rid of the knot around my wrists, but he moved his hand down my waist and drew me even closer, freezing me in place.

His strong arm encircled my bare waist. The roughness of his hand on my skin made me inhale deeply. My waist felt too tiny in his muscular hand, which terrified me. I closed my eyes, surrendering to the feeling.

“You are blushing,” he remarked, kissing my chin. I looked at him, opening my eyes.

“Rudra, please. This is wrong, we shouldn't be doing this,” I repeated my pleas again and again.

My heart fluttered as he placed his forehead on mine, and my breathing quickened wildly when his hand crept towards my back. My eyes met his through the mirror, and I followed his gaze to see his fingers holding my blouse’s string.

“Rudra, don't do this, I am someone else’s bride, please,” I denied again, but he paid no heed and loosened the strings of my blouse. It made me feel all the wrong things, yet it strangely calmed me. It felt like I was letting myself live in the moment to my heart’s content to face all the forthcoming difficulties.

He took more paste in his hand and slathered it on my nape. I began gasping for air when his fingers coated in the cold paste slid toward my lower back, and I couldn't help the moan slipping through my mouth. The warmth his touch emitted turned me into a puddle, and the way he fiercely looked at me broke all the walls I had built around myself.

Pulling his head away, he rubbed his cheek against mine, causing the paste to smudge his cheek. He repeated the same on the other side, too. Holding me, he swept his palms across either of my arms, spreading the paste all over my hands. The intensity of his touch made my breathing uneven.

“Rudra,” my chest heaved up and down, as he intertwined our fingers and yanked my face closer to his. Our lips were too close; it was difficult for me even to utter a word, yet I tried. “Rudra, please. This will complicate everything, please... no more,”

He closed the gap between us despite my warnings, claiming my lips.

The sudden touch of his full lips on me tingled every inch of mine. Butterflies crammed into my stomach, causing a twisted feeling to erupt in my heart. He moved away and looked into my eyes.

“I have thousands of dreams to achieve and titles to claim, but not at the cost of you. I cannot endure losing you,” he poured out and placed his lips over mine

again. Taking my lower lip between his, he sucked it passionately. I momentarily forgot to breathe at the intensity of the pull.

The way he possessively angled my face to deepen the kiss aroused me so badly. Our intimacy triggered tears, brimming in my eyes, and I tried to blink away from the emotional turbulence. Pulling back, he looked at me intently.

“Can you bear his child, Nandani?” he asked, and I looked at him. I tried to comprehend him through his eyes; in return, it felt like I was an open book he was reading with undivided attention.

It was certain that no matter how hard I tried to hide, he would know. He knew everything: what I was feeling, what I wanted, what frightened me, everything. I shook my head no.

“Words,” He said imperatively, and I gulped the hard lump down my throat.

“No,” I whispered almost inaudibly.

He untied the dupatta from my wrists, and I sighed in relief. Gently rubbing my wrists to ease the discomfort, he placed my palms on his cheeks and lazily moved them down his chest.

He never let me touch him before!

“Kal aapki mehendi hai?” (Is it your mehendi[27] ceremony tomorrow?) He asked and I nodded.

Looking into my eyes, he stretched his hand towards my hair and pulled out the pin holding my hair bun, leaving my hair to course freely on his thighs.

He pulled a small knife out of the scabbard designed as a hairpin. Moving it towards his left forearm, I saw him piercing the sharp object into his skin, carving my name, staring right into my eyes.

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I just realised what he did and got up from his lap. When I saw the blood oozing out from his wound, my heart wrenched. With trembling hands, I picked up my dupatta and tore a piece of fabric to stop the blood.

“Are you insane?” My voice squeaked as I screamed at him.

“You're not the only one here,” He smirked.

I sat on my knees and held his arm, wrapping the cloth around the wound. However, he pulled his hand back and rose from the chair. “Rudra, it's bleeding.” I tried to hold him, but in one swift move, he pulled me up and pushed me against the dressing table.

The way he looked into my eyes made me weak at the knees. Cradling my face in his palms, he compelled me to look at him. “Write my name in your hands tomorrow,” he spoke with authority, in a low tone, and I pushed him away.

“Are you mad? Invitations have been sent, and the guests have arrived. This is not a game, this is my life, Rudra,” I spat. Holding my waist, he leaned closer to my lips.

“Exactly. This is not a game; this is your life,” he exclaimed, pulling me in for a passionate kiss.

He took my lips between his and began sucking them intensely. The hair at the back of my neck rose when I felt his hand moving on my midriff, just below the hem of my blouse.

“Kiss me back, Nandani,” He demanded in a whisper, and I blinked nervously. I would never.

But I was too numb to react.

He traced his thumb along the curve of my breast and inched it closer to my perked bud.

He left my lips, and gazing at me, he stroked his thumb on my erect bud, caressing it back and forth, once, twice, thrice…. His torture on my skin had me panting hard for air, moaning. Coming to my senses, I immediately snapped his hand away.

“If I survive, I shall be back to you, but if I don't, you can happily get married to my uncle and become the queen of Suryagarh,” he said, retreating his steps away from me.

His words numbed me, and I tried to stop him, “Rudra, you will not do anything unreasonable,” but he paid no heed and wrapped my dupatta around his wounded arm.

“You're not the only one who's persistent here, Nandani.” As I walked in his direction, I held his hand.

“Rudra, please, you will not do anything,” I pleaded, my lips wobbling. Kissing my forehead, he pulled me into his warm embrace. Moving my hair aside, he tied my blouse.

“All my life, I thought about what my master meant when he insisted that a moment of distraction could cost a lifetime of control. But now I understand what he meant,” He said, pulling away from the hug. My whole form shivered immensely as I looked at him, stepping back.

“I will not do what you are thinking, Rudra.”

He turned around and said, “You will. You will do as I would say, Nandani,” and leapt over the window.

Once he left, an exhausting sigh left my mouth, and as I sat on my bed, I touched my lips, remembering how vehemently he kissed me. I could still feel his lips on mine.

What are you doing to me, Rudra? I hate you. I cursed him in my mind.

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I breathed heavily, rubbing the Haldi off my skin harshly. Even though I was able to scrub off the dried paste, the touch he implanted all over my body persisted. I was reminded of what had just happened.

No, Nandani, don't think about him!

Focus. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. I needed to concentrate to think clearly.

Undressing, I stepped into the pool to cleanse myself. I let the cool water glide over my body, washing away the heat of his scent from my skin. Yet, my mind kept racing with thoughts of what had happened in the chamber earlier.

The way he kissed me, the way he smelled me like I was some drug, and the way he claimed me. His touches were indelible, enchanting almost, something I had never felt before, something that would keep haunting me. I always dreamt of something similar, but it was beyond my imagination when he did that for real.

Once I finished bathing, I changed into my nightgown and lay on the bed, hoping to get some sleep. But thoughts kept lurking in my mind about everything that had happened with him.

Until now, I had been worried about the wedding and the King, but my true source of distress was Rudra. Whatever he did to me was too intense and harmful; it lingered permanently in my mind.

His rough hands pressed against my back, his grip firm on my wrists, his commanding eyes peering down at me... No. Stop, Nandani, just sleep. Don't let his actions haunt you.

I closed my eyes, and after a long time, I fell asleep.

I woke up to a blaring knock on my door. “Nandani, open the door.”

Ruhani's voice reached my ears with a tinge of urgency and worry, prompting me to immediately step down from the bed and open the door. She was panting and appeared anxious.

“What happened?” I asked, and she closed the door. “You did not tell me. How dare you?” she exclaimed, shooting me a deadly glare. I frowned, not understanding what she meant.

“What?” I asked, and as she walked closer, she said, “Your lover, Rudra.” Something just dropped in my stomach hearing his name from her.

“There wasn't anything to tell,” She raised her eyebrow and crossed her arms in front of her.

“Really? I want to know everything,” she demanded, and I sighed tiringly. “Wait, what?” She brought her hand close to my chin and tilted my face to the side.

“Don't tell me he was here last night,” she murmured in shock. I sat on the couch, palming my face. “Yes, he was here last night and gave me a warning about the wedding,” I said, looking at her. She sat beside me and spoke cautiously, “Do you even know what he is planning? And first of all, what actually happened between you two?”

“Ruhani, I was in love with this man, like, so much in love. I was ready to do anything for him—anything! One night, I slept with him, and later that morning, he

left with a letter that screamed, ‘an eye for an eye.’ Revenge,” I answered, and she shrieked with wide eyes.

“What?? What did he do? I mean, what happened?” she questioned. I sighed in exhaustion.

“We decided to spend a night together, but he gave me something which caused me to fall unconscious, and I'm not sure if he did something. He finally left with a letter which read ‘A scar your family gave to mine and a scar I give back to yours’, and now I hate him so much. Like, he crossed all the limits for revenge,”

“What revenge?” she asked.

“Well, my mother was promised to his father some twenty years ago,” I started, “Back then, my mother didn't know that it was just his dirty game and that he was a man in his late forties. My father ended up marrying her forcibly, and his father decided to take revenge, which my mother almost ended by killing him when he abducted her. So, Rudra is avenging his father, who died because of my parents. And in all of this, he has now involved me. So I decided to marry….” I braced myself and revealed the truth to her.

“... his uncle, who is around eight years old, and Rudra is so furious about it. He doesn't want me to get married to him,” I finished, and an instant scream left her mouth.

“Why the heck are you marrying his uncle? That’s such an absurd decision, Nandani. Stop this,” I swallowed a heavy lump down my throat.

“No, I can't, Ruhani. It's really complicated. Rudra is a hot-headed and wicked man. He knows nothing but his revenge. If I didn’t stop him, he would win the throne of Suryagarh, a kingdom whose king is an old man, and after getting a kingdom that is practically stronger than us, he would attack us,”

She cut me off in the middle, “Then let him attack. Maamujaan is strong, your brother is strong, they will take care of it. You do not have to do this.”

“No, I cannot sacrifice a thousand soldiers and risk my brother's and father's lives for a mere revenge. He must understand that what he is doing is wrong and that his thoughts of revenge are completely unfounded. His realisation will be of no use after thousands die. It will muddle everything up. I simply chose a way that is easy to stop him,” I stated. She held her head in exasperation.

“Do you know what he is planning?” she asked concernedly. She was upset and angry, altogether. “What?” I asked cluelessly. “He is planning to kidnap you,” She informed me, and I rose from the couch.

“What?????”

“Yes. He met Aahil last night and talked about it,” She explained.

“What??? When?? Why?” I asked and she stood up.

“Because what you are doing is wrong, Nandani. You cannot just put your life at stake. What option have you left him with? I’m with him in this. You don't want war, but you're not listening to anyone, and you're being stubborn. Why don't you

understand that no one wants to see you getting married to that old man just because you want to teach him a so-called lesson? This is not done. Forget him, I will kidnap you and plan your escape from this wedding," she spewed, angrily, and suddenly, what he said last night made sense.

How could he kidnap me? How could he come up with such a plan? It was wrong. Why wouldn't he just leave me be?

"But, how can he kidnap me?" I asked, and she sighed. "I do not know. Aahil does,"

"And what did he say?" I asked, referring to her husband, Sultan Aahil.

"He did not say anything. However, upon examining the situation, I believe it is best to support him rather than you. Because you clearly have decided to ruin your life. At least someone is trying to make things right for you," my eyes widened as I listened to her.

"How can you say that? You are my cousin, my friend. How can you take his side? This is so wrong," I stated, and she looked at me with determination.

"Either you are calling off this wedding with that old man, or when Rudra does something to stop the wedding, Aahil and I will be by his side. Do you understand?" She warned me, and I gave her an incredulous look.

"What do you mean?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I mean, if we cannot do anything to stop the wedding, we surely wouldn't do anything if he tried to abduct you," She finished, and I gaped at her statement.

"Unbelievable!" I huffed. She turned on her heels and walked out of the chamber. I plopped on the couch and pulled my hair in frustration.

Urgghhh, I hate you, Rudra. You are turning my family against me.

I palmed my face. How could he be so evil?

Suddenly, there was another knock at the door. I went to open it, and my gaze fell upon a woman in her fifties, whom I didn't seem to recognize. She stepped inside in haste, and I asked, "What? Who are you? You do not belong here."

She immediately nodded and closed the door behind her. I sensed something was wrong when she urgently said, "King Surgami Dev Singh has sent me here." My lips formed an 'o'.

"Why? Why did he send you?" I asked, and she muttered in a low tone.

"I'm a physician and I'm here to check on your virginity. Please lie down on the bed, and pull up your skirt," she stated, and I pursed my lips.

"Ohh, the test," I gulped with fear, taking small, steady steps as I walked towards the bed. As she said, I lay on the bed and pulled my skirt to my knees.

She stepped closer and parted my legs.

I prayed to God when I felt her touch my core with her fingers. It felt so awkward, embarrassing, and frightening. But it was vital as I had to prove my loyalty to him and make him trust me. For a man like him, it mattered.

She pushed her fingers inside, without warning, making me cry in pain.

“Aauucchhh…” Tears collected in my eyes, and she stood up, washing her hands in the bowl on the table. I blinked nervously and asked, “Done?” She nodded, and I tried to stand up but felt slightly uneasy. I walked near her to ask, “So, what do you think? What are you going to tell him?” She gulped, looking straight into my eyes.

“I cannot say…” she stated, and I asked dumbfounded, “What??? But you just checked me,” she sighed.

“Your entrance is a little loose, so I cannot decipher it right,” she added, and my mouth hung open.

“There must be a reason for it.” A lone tear escaped my eye when she responded, “Perhaps intercourse is the reason,” and walked out of the chamber. I sat on the couch, holding my face, trying to control my tears and anger.

How could he? How could he do it? How on earth did he manage to do it after making me unconscious?

I jerked the copper jug on the table nearby with all my force, releasing my anger.

HOW COULD YOU, RUDRA? HOW DARE YOU? I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU SO MUCH!!! I screamed my heart out, bursting into tears, dropping to the floor.

It was my wedding the next day, and if the Physician told the King about it, I'd be done. My plan would be ruined, and he would win.

I had to do something.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

“Look at you,” Ruhani's awestruck voice caught my attention, and I turned to the mirror. The simple green lehenga complemented my fair complexion beautifully, and my braided hair fell elegantly down my back. I left my hands empty for my Mehendi Ceremony.

“Shall we go?” Ruhani asked, and I nodded.

My mind was engrossed in thoughts about what Rudra was planning and the physician’s words. I hated him for doing that when I wasn't in my right mind.

Such a coward!

We reached the hall where the rituals were performed, and my mother sat me on a couch. As soon as I stretched my hands towards the henna artists, they began designing.

It was almost evening when the artists were halfway through the mehendi. I looked at people roaming from pillar to post, preparing for the wedding.

“Show me,” Ruhani peeked at my hands, beside me, commenting on how beautiful the design looked.

“Why don't you start applying it too?” I asked her, and with a smile, she answered.

“I’ve got to change before that, because once I get my mehendi applied, I’ll not be able to change and sleeping in these heavy dresses is a nightmare,” I chuckled,

leaning close to her.

“Why bother?” I whispered, “Apply the henna and let your husband do the rest,” I teased, and she blushed at my remark.

“Ruhani, come here,” my aunt suddenly called, and Ruhani ran to her joyously, spotting her in the middle of the hall, all set to dance.

The women present started playing the instruments, including the tabla and dholak[28], and I laughed, looking at the mother-daughter duo, dancing with other ladies to folk music, twirling and twisting their hands in the air. The sweet tinkling of their anklets and the voice of women singing and giggling echoed in the room, creating a festive atmosphere.

“Ohhh my goddd!” Ruhani's father and other men stepped into the hall, complaining playfully, “No one invited us for such an exclusive show.” He joined the women and began swaying his hips with them.

My stomach ached from all the laughter as I looked at them having fun. Surprisingly, I noticed Haider joining them as well.

“Woahhh,” People cheered for them, and my aunt pulled my mother into the group. She adjusted her dupatta, and Ruhani's father let the ladies take the dance floor.

My mother started dancing with grace, tuning her steps to the music, and I finally saw her happy face after so long. Ruhani held my arms, dragging me into the middle of the hall.

“Let's dance,” she insisted.

“No, Ruhani, I am good,” I said. She held my shoulders and mouthed, “Come on, for once, loosen up, please. You deserve all the happiness.” I gave her a weak smile and agreed to her wish.

“Alright,” I said, joining her but being careful with my sticky, half-done henna hands so as not to smudge them on anyone.

I matched everyone's steps, and my lips curved into the broadest smile as I started to enjoy the dance. My heavy lehenga flared out as I spun around.

My grandmother walked towards me, and taking a tinge of kohl from the corner of her eyes, she fondly applied it behind my ears.

A sudden prickle ran down my spine as I sensed someone's gaze upon me.

Looking around, my eyes fell on a shadow, standing behind a pillar, which made me halt my moves. I craned my neck further to see if it was who I thought it was.

And yes, there he was, in the far corner, standing away from everyone's sight, leaning against the wall, staring at me. His intense gaze paralysed me for a good few seconds.

But the words of the physician crossed my mind, and shooting a death glare his way, I got back to dancing. Taking a couple of spins, I again looked in his direction, but I didn't find him there anymore.

“Come here,” Ruhani's call brought me out of my reverie. She walked me to the couch, where the artists resumed the design to finish my henna.

My mind was once again in a haze. The wedding, the betrayal, the hate, the decisions I made, whatever I was going through, really hit my nerves. But I had to think of a way to win the king's trust.

“.... husband's name to be designed?” The henna artist looked at me questioningly.

“What?” I couldn't pay attention to what she said.

“The groom's name. Do you want it designed?” she repeated, and I didn't know what to say.

“No,” I said, and she blinked at me, clueless, but eventually got back to her work.

The ceremony continued until late in the evening. By the end of the day, the king of Suryagarh and his convoy arrived.

My heart filled with anxiousness, hearing the news. The King was here, and the physician would tell him everything. I wasn't fretting about my virginity; it was just the perception of people, but I did not want the King to bring up such an issue. Moreover, I did not wish for my plan to fail.

“Nandani,” As I stepped inside my chamber, Suman followed suit.

“The King has settled in the guest chamber,” she informed me, and I nodded, looking at her.

“Stop the physician from reaching the King before I see him,” I said. She frowned at me.

“What are you suggesting?” She asked and I cautiously said, “Aiming two targets with one arrow. A night with the king, so he wouldn't question my dignity and stop Rudra from making any further plans,”

“What???” she looked at me, horrified, and I glared at her, reminding her about the volume of her voice.

“What???” she asked again, but in a low tone, and I nodded. “But, Nandani, it's dangerous and wrong and … you cannot do this…you should not do this,” her words dripped with dismay as she spoke breathlessly, and I smiled at her.

“Everything is fair in love and war. And, ironically, we have had both. It was love between us, but now it’s war. So everything is fair for me,” I said bitterly, and she restlessly shifted her weight from one foot to another.

“Nandani, please reconsider your decision. This is too dangerous—”

“No, it is not,” I said, cutting her off. She frowned at my reply. “What do you mean?”

“You just have to get me an herb that will make the king lose consciousness because, obviously, I'm not going to sleep with him for real; I'll just pretend I did.” Taking her hands in mine, I instructed my plan. “And, you will go and bring Rudra. So, when he catches me sneaking out of the king’s chamber in the middle of the

night, he can reconsider his decision of kidnapping me.” She was panic-stricken by the time I finished.

“No, you will not do this. If you want to be with him, talk to him, fight with him. But please, not this,”

“Ssshhh,” I shushed her. Holding her shoulders, I said, “This is between him and me, Suman. He started this dirty game, so let me end it his way. " She tried to oppose, but I stopped her. “Just do as I say. For now, help me get this henna off and bring me a dress to change into.” She looked at me, confused, but eventually did what I said.

She returned with a bowl of oil, and we rubbed the henna off my hands.

Later, when I returned to my chamber after changing my clothes, I heard a knock on my door.

I opened the door and found my parents standing with a big platter in their hands. They stepped inside, and my father said, “We thought maybe we could have dinner together.” My lips wobbled, and I stuttered with a heavy voice, “You should have called me.” My mother placed the plate on the table and lovingly patted my head.

“It's alright. Come, sit,” I said, nodding as I settled between them on the couch.

As my father fed me the first morsel so affectionately, I couldn't tame my tears anymore.

“I don't know why our ancestors created such a ritual, but it is a tragic reality that daughters are meant to leave their parents and families behind. Tomorrow is your last day in the Kingdom. And since it is the demand of the tradition, we too have to bid farewell,” my mother’s voice turned hoarse, as if she was restraining herself from crying.

“Nandani, it's not late yet,” my father interrupted. I would be the happiest to hear that you have changed your mind about marrying that old man. We will find you a better suitor—someone your age, someone brave, someone you truly deserve. And don't worry about the consequences—we can handle them,” he said.

“Baapusa, I have grown up spending a lot of time with normal people, the wives of the soldiers, their kids, their mothers. We royals live in our palaces happily with our family, assured that the soldiers who serve us day and night will take care of our safety,” I softly pressed on the seriousness of the matter. “But these soldiers have a family too, who long for them. So, how can I break their hope by risking the lives of their loved ones when I can simply establish a peace treaty between the two kingdoms? I’m sorry, but I cannot let that happen, especially when I'm the root cause,” I illustrated the whole scenario, and he sighed sharply.

“So you will stand by your decision?”

“Very much,” I confirmed, and we again got back to feeding each other, living the last few blissful moments as a daughter.

None of us mentioned my brother throughout our conversation, but I knew they were hurt. So much.

We called it a night, and I locked the door once they left.

I had to get back to work.

At midnight, I covered my head with the veil and tiptoed out of my chamber, being on alert to avoid getting caught.

Once I reached the king's chamber, I noticed that Rudra was not present. The soldiers who were guarding looked at me, and I respectfully asked them to inform the king of my arrival.

Suman stood behind me holding a tray. Once the king permitted, the soldiers let us in. As we stepped inside, I saw the king preparing for the night.

“Nandani! What are you doing here at this time of night?” He looked at me, surprised. Cold sweats drenched my forehead and palms as I contemplated the possible consequences this plan could cause.

“I do not mean to cause you any inconvenience, your majesty, but I am here to have a word with you,” I clarified politely.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The vaidya earlier today had me examined. But for some reason, she could not quite establish whether I was chaste or not,” I said, and he tried interpreting.

“But I am,” I immediately clarified and continued, “I've never been touched before. I don't know what confused her, but now that I’m here, why don't you find it yourself?” I justified myself. He looked at me, perplexed, and I added, “You are an experienced man, Your Majesty. I believe you know better, and since we are getting married tomorrow, I don't see a problem with it,” I stated.

By then, Suman had served the juice in a glass she had brought with her. Placing it on the tray, she walked toward the king.

“If you accept this glass of juice, I’ll take it, you accept my proposal,” I offered. He seemed uncertain initially, but picked up the glass anyway, giving a lewd smirk.

“Sure,” He agreed, sipping the juice, and ordered me, Suman, to leave us alone. My heart shuddered at the thought of being alone in the same room as him.

“Come, join me in the bed,” a painful shiver crawled up my spine, when he softly beckoned me.

I could see him lying on the bed through my veil. Hoping he'll lose consciousness soon, I steadily stepped towards the bed. By the time I reached closer to the edge, I looked at him, blinking rapidly, shaking his head, and soon he passed out.

“Phew….” I heaved a sigh of relief and immediately strode towards the exit, but stopped midway. I couldn't leave until Rudra returned to guard the chamber and see me sneaking out. That was the whole reason for the plan.

I waited past midnight when the sound of a cuckoo caught my ears in the distance.

It was perhaps Suman, because I asked her to let me know as soon as Rudra got back on duty.

I ruffled my hair a little, letting a few strands fall free, removed some of my bangles, and pinched my cheeks to make them red, hoping it would look like I was blushing.

Bracing myself, I opened the door, and Rudra turned to look at me. His usually guarded face was struck with absolute shock, and he scrutinized me from head to toe.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I was wonderstruck. My feet felt as if they were nailed to the ground as I began to look at her in a different light, in a way I never had before.

The way she danced so elegantly and effortlessly in the middle of the hall kept my eyes glued to her. I mean, she was definitely beautiful, but I didn't know why; I found her exceptionally captivating that night.

Suddenly, she halted her dancing, making my heart skip a few beats.

At that very moment, when our gazes locked, something felt strange, like something hot and flaming between us—something I had never felt before.

The way she looked at me made me feel like I was the main character in someone else's story. It felt as if I mattered to someone, even if I was playing the role of an antagonist; I was present.

I've never had such attention in my life, and I never felt important. However, the way she regarded my presence made me feel all her emotions, which she had masked behind her anger.

I clenched my fist and gulped a hard lump down my throat.

She turned her gaze down and continued dancing.

Walking out of the hall, I strode toward my uncle’s chamber to talk to him. I needed to find a way to sort all this out because I couldn't see her doing this to herself, to her family, and to me.

As I arrived at the chamber, the guards let me in, and I called him. “Uncle,” he turned around to look at me, cocking his eyebrow.

“Uncle? I hardly remember the last time you called me that,” He taunted.

“I want to talk to you about something,” I said in a low yet authoritative tone, and he insolently spread his arms to relax on the couch. Clasping my hands behind me, I took a few breaths to calm myself and said, “Back off from this wedding.” His eyes widened in shock.

“Back off from the wedding? No, I will not,” he gritted angrily.

“The man Nandani is rumoured to be having an affair with is me,” I disclosed the truth. “What???” Standing up, he hollered.

“Yes, I left her, and now she is using you to take revenge on me,” I restrained myself from lashing out.

“It doesn't matter anymore. You better get back to your work,” He stated, and I stepped forward.

“Uncle, you can get any woman you want. But Nandani is my girl; she is my everything, everything I've got. It was an unwise decision of mine to leave her back then, but now that I think about it, I despise the thought of her getting away from me. So please... Please, uncle,” I pleaded, and he placed his hand on my shoulder.

Never in my life have I ever pleaded with anyone. Ever.

“I see what you mean, Rudra, but it's too late. Hope you understand,” he stated, and my blood began boiling with rage. The crooked expression on his face made it clear that he was in no way going to agree with what I was saying. But I had to try.

“Please, Uncle, please try to understand. If you could conv—”

“Stop it,” he cut me off, “And get back to your work.”

I stared at him blankly and retreated a few steps to exit his chamber. My whole body shook with anger as soon as I was outside. I just wanted to rip him apart.

I meant it when I said that she was my everything. I truly did.

I forcefully punched the trunk of the tree, making my knuckles bleed, but it wasn't pain that fogged my mind, but her face.

The moment she entered my chamber to speak with me, the instant she gazed at me and requested that I make love to her, the words she used when discussing us were all vivid in my memory.

Why? Why was she doing it? Why the heck does she want revenge? Why was she so dead set on ruining her life?

Why? Why? Why?

I punched the trunk with every unanswered question. My eyes began tearing up because of my inner turmoil and the emotions I was feeling.

“Rudra,”

Suddenly, a man’s voice caught my attention, prompting me to turn around. Although it was dark, the voice sounded familiar, even though I couldn't see its owner.

“Aahil?” I probed, and the person in question came into view. I was trying to hold back my emotions when he noticed my face, but suddenly, stepping closer, he hugged me and patted my shoulder.

“Come on, man, you've got this. If it makes you feel any better, men in general are nothing without these ‘driving men crazy’ women. They are the ones we get energized for, and surprisingly, they are the ones who drain our energy, too,” I chuckled at his comment, pulling myself away from the hug.

“So, what happened?” he asked, and I ran my fingers through my hair. “I tried to talk to my uncle, but like every time, he was super unconcerned about my happiness. It's the purpose of his life to keep me away from things that bring me hope,” I said, and he sighed.

“So, the plan remains the same, kidnapping?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Thus far, yeah. No other option,” I stated, and he smiled encouragingly.

“My wife, my brother-in-law, and I—we’re already with you. But now there's this one powerful man we must persuade to be on our side. Don't worry; I have some plans,” he explained dramatically.

“Come with me,” he told me. We took a stealthy path to the guest chamber on the other side of the palace. He then led me to a decorated hall where a private celebration was taking place.

As we entered, I felt everyone's eyes on me, but I could only recognize a few faces. The place was swarming with people. One of them was Haider, undoubtedly holding a glass of alcohol.

“Oh, and who is this young man?” a gruff voice caught my ears, and I looked at a tall, sturdy man who seemed to be in his late forties.

“This is Rudra,” Aahil chimed in, looking at him and turning to me. “And Rudra, this is my father-in-law, Sultan Rafiq Sulaiman.”

I was too stunned to speak because Sultan Rafiq Sulaiman had an undeniably charismatic personality. I was lost in thought when he greeted me in an Islamic manner, and I responded by joining my palms in greeting.

“Nice to meet you, kid,” he said. Aahil and I took our seats.

“Ohh, Rura, Rukshuk... What was your name again?” Haider kept mispronouncing my name. “Rudra,” Aahil corrected him, and he grinned. “Yeah, right, Rudra.”

“How drunk is he?” I asked, and Sultan Rafiq swiftly replied, “Very much. My son is living his life to the fullest, but his mother has not allowed me to live mine.” I nodded and looked at Aahil.

“And how drunk is he?” I asked, leaning closer to Aahil, referring to Sultan Rafiq.

He answered, “Very much, but no one has to know about this because his daughter is my wife, his wife is my mother-in-law, and his other wife is my aunt, and in no case should anyone learn the truth that he drank.” I tried to bite my smile at his ranting.

“Smart man, I see how you flatter your father-in-law,” I patted his shoulder, and he chuckled. “And why aren't you drunk yet?” I asked him.

“I'll celebrate with my wife later,” he murmured shyly. “Ohhh…” I teased him, and he offered me a drink.

“No, thanks. I don't drink,” I said, and he laughed.

“Of course you wouldn’t. You are on some serious mission of kidnapping the bride,” I chuckled, and Sultan Rafiq quickly slurred in between. “Who is kidnapping the bride?”

“Sharp hearing, I must say,” Aahil whispered, and I saw Sultan positioning himself to look at us.

“Why did no one tell me that there is a twist in the wedding?” he complained, and I lifted my brows, not believing how relaxed they were about this whole plan.

“Well, Rudra is planning to abduct the bride since he's in love with her, but the bride's father is against it,” Aahil explained, and I looked at him in disbelief, spilling all the wrong facts, so I tried to correct him.

“No, it isn’t,” but he stopped me mid-way.

“Ohh… then I got to talk about this to the king,” Sultan Rafiq said, and Aahil immediately spoke for me. “But he's in denial. The Princess is getting married to

an eighty-year-old man at that.” I looked at him with wide eyes.

What in the name of help was he doing?

“What???? An eighty-year-old man? Heavens no. That's impossible, no way.” His voice raised an octave higher, and I was about to stand up, but Aahil pulled me back.

“Abbujaan29, Rudra loves the Princess the way you love my mother-in-law, and I love your daughter, maybe so much more than that. But both the old king and her father are his enemies because he is not yet a king. She loves him too. But they're not allowing them to marry,” he so subtly coaxed him. “Talking is not going to work now. The wedding is tomorrow, and we really, really need to help the couple.” He stared at me for a few seconds, and I swallowed in fear.

For heaven’s sake, why were my plans being disclosed so blatantly in the grand order of drunken minds?

“Alright, I’m in. But I'll have to confirm a few things first,” he said, and I looked at Aahil, giving me a winning smile.

“Don't worry, I'll send Ruhani to you.”

I didn't know what the heck was going to happen. Could I trust these people—strangers?

Suddenly, the music pitched higher, uplifting the mood, and Sultan Rafiq stood up, harmonising his moves with the rhythm. He then stumbled near the music choir and began playing tabla with them.

“Abbujaan, dance on this one,” Aahil cheered him up, singing, and Haider joined them. “Well, let me play the drums,”

“Woah!!!” I exhaled heavily, looking at the trio's madness, enjoying themselves as if there was no tomorrow. The Son was playing drums, the son-in-law was singing, and the father was dancing drunk.

Epic.

The wholesome sight made me laugh my heartily.

Suddenly, the thought of my family crossed my mind, and my smile drooped.

Inhaling a deep breath, I got up and left the place to get back to my duty. I wanted to talk to the king again, but I didn't think it was of any use.

Honestly, I was on the verge of giving up on the idea of having the throne and ruling and all. But the way Nandani said that she was ready to spend her life with me, even in a small cottage, gave me the courage to fight for us and make things right.

Reaching the chamber, I retired the other soldiers and took my place to guard the doors.

After a while, the chamber doors opened, and I turned around to see why the king was still awake. But, as soon as my sight fell on Nandani, I lost it.

“What the heck are you doing here?” I shouted, and she stepped out, closing the door behind her while muttering in a sultry tone. “Do not scream, his majesty has

just slept.”

As soon as I heard her say that, I clamped her throat and pushed her against the wall. She calling him King was enough to ignite the anger in me.

“What are you doing here, Nandani?” I clenched my jaw to control my fury.

I wanted to believe that this was all a joke, that it wasn't what I thought it was. However, the way she was panting, her flushed cheeks, and her heart beating loudly suggested otherwise.

My insides stiffened; the thought of something happening between her and that man made me shake with immense ire. I wanted the answer to be ‘nothing’. But—

“What do you think the king and I were doing in the middle of the night, right before the day of our wedding?” she counter-questioned. She was choking for air, but the assertiveness in her words spoke to how serious she was.

My grip tightened around her neck, and the rage surging inside me clouded my thoughts. It was unbearable for me to contain my anger any longer, but her eyes staring back at me prevented me from doing anything that would harm her.

My emotions were all over the place. Pain, anger, and hurt all made me so restless; I was in a frenzy.

“Don't you dare…. Don't you dare say that,” I said calmly, hoping she would start laughing and tell me this was all a silly prank.

But she replied blankly, “A scar you gave me and a scar I give you back. We are even now.”

The moment she uttered those words, my whole world shattered. Devastatingly shattered.

The sharp pain in my heart caused tears to blur my vision. I felt numb as my hands slipped from her throat, causing me to stumble back.

“What?” I tried to ask. Rubbing her neck, she walked away.

I stood there, frozen, as I did not know what to do with myself.

What did she do? How could she?

I screamed internally and followed her. The guards outside her chamber crossed their spears in front of me, preventing me from going inside.

Taking my dagger out, I glared at them. “Don't mess with me, not now,” I threatened, and they instantly moved away in fright.

Pushing the doors open, I stormed inside, locking the door behind me.

“What do you mean?” I roared. I was going ballistic. Red was all I could see. But, rather than answering my question, she stretched her arms and removed her dupatta.

Getting into bed, she turned her back on me to unfold the duvet, when my sight fell on her backless blouse. But, before she could, I held her wrist and pushed her against the headboard.

“How dare you? How could you stoop so low as to sleep with him? What about your self-respect, your pride? How could you?” I seethed in anger, and she started

laughing, unexpectedly.

“Pride? Self-respect?” she mocked me, and I held her neck to stop her from laughing.

“How dare you, Nandani?” I angled her face to look at me.

“Who the heck are you, teaching me lessons on pride and self-respect?” I could sense the same rage dripping from her words.

“Who the heck am I? You're questioning me? You love me,” I exclaimed. We were heaving in equal fervour.

“I loved you... ‘Loved’, as in the past. The day you left me with that letter telling me I was a scar to my family, you lost all my love for you. I loved you... loved,” she spat, and I pulled her closer because her words were severing me.

“So you'll sleep with just anyone? With my uncle, an old man?” My voice turned hoarse.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

His disappointed tone made me look at him.

“Yes, because you created this impression of me in the eyes of the world by doing such a dishonourable act,” I said.

His hold tightened on my neck, and he growled at me. “Do not provoke me, Nandani, or I might do something that we both will regret later.”

I tried to get away from him. But he swiftly held my wrist, twisting it behind me as he pulled me closer.

He clasped both my hands with one hand and used the other to cup my neck. As my eyes met his intense, daring ones, I felt too feeble in his hands.

“I left you because I cannot marry you,” He said, and I scoffed at his same reasoning.

“With a letter slapped on my face, where you allegedly called me a scar, a dishonour to my family,” we were too close, close enough for me to notice the muscle in his jaw flex when he heard my reply.

“It's not about you, never was. It was about your parents,” he said. My insides tightened, resulting in a broken tone as I spoke.

“And how am I any different from them? It is about me because I'm their daughter, and you too accept that, because if not, you wouldn't have used me to get revenge on them.” I said. His hold loosened on my neck, and he rested his forehead on mine.

“I’m sorry, okay. Please, I’m so sorry…” his words faltered as he went on,

“But please just tell me that it was a joke. I refuse to believe it, to accept it, to go through it, please. Just tell me that it was a trick,” I turned my head away from him and squirmed under his hold.

“Whatever you witnessed is real, and I'm warning you, don't you dare think of abducting me. You've ruined my life enough, but for god's sake, now just stay out of it,” I stated.

He took a deep breath, nodding his head, he asked, “So you slept with him, just to take revenge on me?” My gaze softened.

“No, it wasn't just about revenge. It is about the feeling you go through when the person you deeply care about tarnishes all your love and trust. You hurt my parents by disgracing me. So, how does it feel now? Tell me how it feels now that the person whose name you so proudly have engraved on your hand is a disgrace to you?” I questioned, and he sternly spoke, “You are not a disgrace to me, you get it.”

Inhaling deeply, I asked in a low tone, “And, what about when I'll be pregnant with his baby?”

He pulled me even closer to him, and affected by the proximity, I turned my face to the side. His forehead bumped on my temple, and I heard him breathing angrily over my ear.

“I'll burn you, this whole damn world and myself if you dare get pregnant with his child, or with anyone's child, understand?” the dominance in his tone, the way he said it did something to my stomach, like butterflies heavily fluttering.

Holding my cheek, he turned my face to look at him. It was too much, too overwhelming, and my lashes felt heavier, making me blink rapidly.

He caressed my neck and cheek lightly, inhaled deeply, and asked in a slow, gentle voice, “Now, please tell me it was all a lie, that nothing happened between the both of you.” The way he gently caressed my cheek with his fingers and the desperation in his voice made me feel weak in the knees.

There was a battle within me between my heart and my mind. My heart, in its love, wanted to tell him it was all a deception, that it wasn't true, but my brain opposed it and did not want to trust him. It felt as if my mind didn't want my heart to be hurt any further. It was important to make him realize that he could not just break people’s hearts for his convenience.

“No, it is not a lie,” I said, and he immediately yanked me away. I steadied myself on the bed and looked into his eyes burning with fury.

Tears streamed down my face as I saw him retreat. Turning around, he left me alone, and I tried to control myself. I didn't know why, but seeing him so helpless, with tears falling from his eyes, made my heart ache.

But I couldn't just give up. Come what may.

A woman's heart is not an object to be used. One moment, you act in an evil manner, disregarding grace and disgrace, and the next, you speak like a saint, lecturing on principles and ethics. That is not okay, at least not for me. He must understand that women have feelings and that he cannot simply play with my emotions.

Heaving an uneven sigh, I tried to calm myself and got on the bed to catch some sleep.

I stared at the ceiling. The rich colors of these intricate designs, with gold accents, would forever haunt my mind once I left this place—my chamber, my palace, my home. And suddenly, I realized that I would probably end up homeless.

I chuckled at the thought, washing away my tears, and slowly slipped into my slumber.

Waking up early the following day, I sauntered like I always did in the palace’s corridors. It was finally the day of my wedding, yet I wasn't sure who my husband would be until the ceremony happened.

The soft green grass tickled my feet as I walked in the royal garden. It felt pleasant. I sat on the lush floor in the middle of the garden and closed my eyes. The scent of the fresh morning breeze soothed my insides.

Never in my life have I lied. I tried many times but couldn't. Nandani and lies never went together well in a sentence. But for the first time, I did; I lied to Rudra because I couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth. I didn't know how hurt or irreparable I was, that the lies which used to scare me suddenly became my biggest escape.

“Nandani,” Suman called, and I opened my eyes to see her sitting beside me. She enveloped me in a side hug and said, “You know, to be brave like you is my dream.”

I smiled at her weakly and asked in a low voice, “Where is he?” Releasing a breath, she replied, “I don't exactly know, but I heard that he left last night and no one has seen him ever since.” I nodded, palming my face.

“You look worried,” she stated, and I turned my gaze to look at her.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, and she observed my face for a few seconds.

“Nandani, if I ask you something, will you answer me truly?” I nodded, and she took a deep breath and asked, “Do you really love Rudra so much?” I smiled at her sadly and looked down at my palms.

“What do you think the colour of my henna is indicating?”

She looked at the color of henna on my hands. “Well, the darkest shade is saying that you'll be loved deeply, and you should be,” looking back at me, she said, “I mean, I was just six when I met you for the first time. And since then, our friendship grew immensely, and not for once did you ever make me feel like I'm just an attendee, but a friend,” she expressed her thoughts very fluently. “Nandani, you're kind to people. You never look down on anyone because they are poor, nor do you speak highly of and favor just the rich. I've seen you sharing your food with the children of the attendees. You deserve all the love that exists in the world. I don't know what the future has in store for you, but I'll pray that you receive the love and respect you deserve,” I turned teary by the time she finished.

“Love is not a game, not planned, not a hit-and-trial. You cannot be particular. When you love someone, you love them whole. You love their flaws, their imperfections, their negatives. Love never happens because you find them perfect; it happens because your heart chooses to look beyond their good and bad. Love is just love. It cannot be anything else. And in me, this love is in the form of fire, which is burning for him. Love is effortless, yet demands sacrifices. It is not simple,” I poured my thoughts out so naturally, and she furrowed her eyebrows.

“It sounds complicated,” I smiled. “Well, it does,”

Silence followed, and the first ray of the sun showered me with its warmth, bringing all the positivity.

“We should get inside,” Suman said, and we both got up.

Returning to my chamber, I took a quick bath and offered my prayers to God. Once I finished, I heard a loud knock at my door and walked to open it. I frowned as I looked at my mother, who was panting heavily.

“What happened? You seem in a haste,” I asked. Stepping inside, she immediately locked the door.

“The king,” she huffed, and I waited for her to talk further. She inhaled deeply and said, “The king had to leave.” I looked at her, dumbfounded.

“What???” she nodded. “Where? Why? What happened? Is everything okay?” I asked altogether

“I don't know,” she said, “but it seemed important; that speaks for the way he had to leave in the middle of the night.”

“And, the wedding?” I instantly questioned, and she sighed. “He said he'll be back for the wedding and asked us not to worry.”

No… no, that… that didn’t sound right. Why did that make me feel so anxious? He did say he'd be back. But… where was Rudra? And where did the king have to go? There were so many doubts in my mind.

“So now?” I asked her, and she narrowed her eyes to nothing like she was contemplating what to say.

A few moments later, making a face, she said, “Well, I hope for him never to make it back, and be gone forever.” I glared at her, and she asked, “What?? Your little fantasy, is it not over yet?”

“It is not my fantasy. It's the best thing to do,” I muttered, annoyed. She sighed and looked at me seriously.

“Nandani, can I ask you something?” I nodded, and she asked me in a slow voice. “What if Rudra kidnapped him? I mean, he was planning to abduct you.” The moment she voiced her assumption, my eyes bulged out of my sockets in shock.

He was not planning to kidnap me, but the king. But wait—

“But the king left us with the message. Was it a letter or did he say it in person?” I asked.

“He said it in person to your father,” she replied, and I sighed in relief.

“Now, that means we should wait for him and continue with the wedding preparations. Because I don't think Rudra will create obstacles anymore,”

Knitting her brows together, she asked, “How are you so sure?” I bit my lower lip nervously and muttered in a soft tone. “That's a secret,” She looked at me suspiciously.

“What did you do?” she questioned cautiously.

“Nothing, I swear, nothing, trust me,” I rambled almost immediately.

Looking at me with uncertainty, she exclaimed, “Alright, now you better get ready because all this decoration and all this excitement will be ruined before you even know it.” She chuckled at the end, and I didn't know why, but something felt strange.

Was she hiding something?

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

It was wrecking—her walking stealthily out of my uncle's chamber. That sight anguished me, immensely.

I wanted to scream… scream my lungs out because I couldn't take it anymore. I had no words to explain the depth of my pain. My heart throbbed heavily, as if someone were stabbing it repeatedly with all their might.

That image—the state she was in—yes, it hurt me more than I could imagine.

How could she... How could she stoop so low for revenge? She slept with an old man to teach me a lesson? Was she that desperate? Why so much vengefulness?

I fled out of the palace premises and marched to where my horse was.

Her actions infuriated me. But I was beyond angry at that old man because he knew… he knew I was into that girl, yet he decided to marry her, and…. What man would sleep with a girl who was in love with his nephew?

Bastard! I would never spare him for that, ever. He would pay for it.

Mounting my horse, I hurried back to Suryagarh. Once I arrived, I stormed towards the servants' quarters and opened my room door. Rummaging through my belongings, I searched for the sword my mother gave me when I was just seven years old to learn to combat.

Clutching its hilt, I drew the sword from the sheath and strode toward the royal court. It was past midnight, and the place was dark and deserted. The guards at the door glanced at me and the naked sword in my hand.

On instinct, they drew their swords and maneuvered to attack me. I swiftly swung my sword, and the metallic clanging resonated in the empty corridors.

While I was engaged with the guards, chaos erupted as soldiers of the royal army joined in the combat. I tried to push my way in, but suddenly one guard plunged his dagger into my arm. I looked at him and immediately thrust my sword into his gut. He screamed in excruciating pain, blood flowing out from the deep cut on his stomach, making him fall to his knees.

Instantly, other soldiers lunged at me with their swords, and I drew my sword from the wounded guard to engage them. Blood trickled down my upper arm, but that did not stop me.

I didn't stop until I got to the throne.

I told him… I told him she was my woman, yet he dared to sleep with her. To hell with him being my uncle and the King.

Two more soldiers fell to the ground, and suddenly, one of them fled. Fuming with anger, I slaughtered a few more soldiers, knocking them over onto the ground.

As soon as I opened the gigantic doors of the hall, my gaze fell on the bejeweled throne, glimmering under the moonlight, streaming through the latticed marble windows. The majestic hall echoed with my footsteps as I tread toward the dais.

I pulled the dagger out, which was penetrating my arm, causing profuse bleeding. With a bloodied arm and attire, I climbed the stairs and stroked my fingers over the royal seat.

The velvety touch reminded me of all the harsh memories I had with the king, particularly the way he constantly insulted me for being the son of a low-level concubine.

It was a bitter reality that a person's status and class mattered more than their potential, proficiency, and hard work.

My mother was my father’s concubine and later became his first wife. However, no members of the royal family accepted her wholeheartedly due to her social status. They treated her worse than the bottom-rung attendees. Even after my birth, this treatment persisted, and they called us the ‘illegitimate ones’.

We were kids; what was our fault? Why were we accused of a crime we never committed? Why did they treat us like culprits and look down on us, and why were we deprived of our rights? My father’s pyre consumed the little peace my mother had left.

Many people were responsible for all the miseries we endured. The person who killed my father, the king, and those who blamed my siblings and me, simply because our mother was a slave.

The residents of the palace were her killers. She was sick and isolated from everything, yet none of them, no one, came forward to help her, leaving her bereft of any medicinal support. Despite all the struggles, she raised me like a prince and wished for me to become a great king who would protect his kingdom and its people.

And so I waited. I waited for years to get what was mine because I wanted to fulfill my mother’s wish. But some people are simply not worthy of our patience. They always behave like the vipers they are. One of them was undoubtedly the king, who had lost both sons, making me the next in line to succeed. But that old bastard valued blood and standards above everything.

But I had had enough of being nice to the king. I had waited long enough for the right time.

Now it was time for me to take action. I needed to make a higher jump because if I continued climbing the ladder, following smaller plans, this world would keep pulling my feet down, never allowing me to reach where I wanted to.

I had to, for Nandani. Because she was the only person I ever called mine, I couldn't tolerate anyone eyeing what was mine. How dare that scoundrel touch her? I was so enraged.

I sat on the throne, and closing my eyes, I promised myself to be menacing.

Suddenly, footsteps rushed into the hall, creating havoc. I opened my eyes to find the chief of justice, the nobles, and all the courtiers present, accompanied by a troop of soldiers holding swords in their hands.

“What do you think you are doing sitting on the royal throne?” the chief railed. Turning the honed point of the sword toward the ground and slumping forward, I rested my bleeding arm on its pommel.

“Before the next moonrise, I will be the King. Now, you all have two choices: swear your fealty to me or give up on your life.” Chaos heightened in the room, and they all began to murmur to each other.

A few of them were my followers, who stepped forward and stood by my side. Those who shared the ideology of ‘blood and status is everything and above’ with the king held their ground, and one of them opposed: “We will never serve the son of a slave. Did you forget where you belong, Rudra?”

I faced him. “Well, my father was a prince, so rationally, I belong here, by blood and by strength. And it is not Rudra... it is Rana Rudra Dev Singh,” I roared, and the man stepped forward, attempting to threaten me.

“You know, one word from me and these soldiers will decapitate you and history will never know that someone like you ever existed,” I chuckled at his venomous words.

“Calm down, my dear minister, don't strain your heart getting so riled up at such an age. I'm afraid you might become history soon,” his eyes widened in fury upon hearing my reply.

“Get him and throw him behind bars,” he immediately commanded. The soldiers instantly began moving toward me. Standing up, I clenched the sword’s hilt and stretched my wrists, watching them.

“So…. none of you ever won combat while training with me,” I said, taking my first step down the stairs. “I wonder how brutal your death would be when I finally use my battling techniques today.” They stopped at a distance, frozen in fear, because neither could they get their hands on me, nor could they ignore the minister’s command.

I descended the stairs and walked towards the ministers. I pointed my swords at them and said, “You are not my target. Go to that bastard, Surgami Dev Singh, and tell him his boy is waiting for him. Let me kill him, and I will touch none of you.” The ministers retreated, quivering, as my stature towered over them.

“He will be here shortly,” they exclaimed, and I nodded. Even though I had warned them, I looked at a group of soldiers lifting their swords to attack me. But before their swords could reach me, I pushed mine against theirs and pulled out my dagger.

“So, you want it this way, hnn?” One of them targeted my injured arm, while the others struggled to keep up with my speed.

“Ahhhh…” the soldier cried loudly as I plunged my sword into his stomach, making him fall to the ground. I attacked the others. A few were killed, and a few were injured. The hall reverberated with violent screams and reeked of blood.

By that time, my prime target arrived, shouting authoritatively. “What the heck are you doing?”

I turned around to see him holding a sword, and the mere sight of him antagonized me.

Death—a normal death wouldn't be enough. I wanted to afflict him with so much pain, torment him, give him a slow, agonising death, so he would regret what he did to my girl.

“I’m claiming what's yours like you did with what’s mine,” I said, dropping my sword and sprinting to him. Clutching his neck, I pushed him against the wall at full strength.

A group of soldiers attacked me from behind, slashing my back, but my hold on him did not loosen, not even a bit. Blood rushed to his face as he struggled for air and writhed in my hands to escape.

“How dare you? How could you even think of that?” I growled at him, and suddenly he shoved a dagger into my abdomen. My knees weakened, and my hold detached from his neck. He gasped for breath, coughing, and barked out a laugh.

“That girl is promiscuous and a little minx. She offered to sleep with her,” This was it; the moment those words slipped out of his mouth, I curled my right hand into a fist and delivered a strong punch right to the side of his jaw, holding his shoulder with the other hand.

“She's everything I've got, and you did not spare her either,” I gritted, and a squad of soldiers lunged at me, tearing my skin, making me bleed, but the strength in my hands did not for once falter while punching that old bastard in his guts. He fell on his knees, throwing up blood, and the soldiers drew me back.

Circling, they attacked me and I tried to match their blows, simultaneously pulling the dagger out of my stomach. The sting made me breathe out a howl, wincing in pain. I again charged at them, and the King scrambled away in the middle of the battle.

“You will never get the throne until I am alive,” He yelled, standing at the exit and turning towards the soldiers he commanded, “Kill him.” The tremor of fear in his tone did not go unnoticed by me.

And the troop sprang at me. The soldiers who were on my side, and I fought them back.

With the sunrise, the cries of pain also rose. Hundreds were wounded, and a few died. However, the King fled with a small convoy.

I fell on my knees with hundreds of gashes on my body, bleeding grievously.

Despite the ongoing battle and the king’s survival, the throne’s vacancy and the absence of a ruler threatened disruption in the kingdom. Therefore, as regent, I claimed the royal prerogative to ensure the kingdom’s stability and progress.

But that wasn't enough. Although I had only a battalion of soldiers on my side, the royal army of the state included soldiers who supported him. Despite being

their head commander, their true loyalty lay with him.

The sun, blazing at its peak, indicated it was afternoon, and I was still fighting the battle. That boneheaded king ordered his army to fight me and then fled; therefore, I could never win because the battle is only considered won when the current ruler is dead.

The sun set until the last soldier thudded to the ground, leaving me with the people by my side. My stance was unsteady as I fought thousands of soldiers alone in the long battle.

But the bloody day had not ended. For now, I was in the regency, a temporary king. And no king and kingdom would ever be complete without a queen.

The time had come to bring the Queen to her kingdom.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

After completing some rituals, the attendants helped me prepare for the wedding. Ruhani didn't want to be a part of it. She was anxious about what would happen, but deep down, I knew what would occur.

The sun was about to set, yet the king wasn’t back. I felt mystifyingly peaceful, but a part of me was anxious, too anxious. I was jittery, and thoughts of what consequences would arise if the king never made it back kept running through my mind.

“Shall we make you ready?” Suman's voice brought me out of my trance, and when I looked at her, she seemed worried.

I asked her to bring the leftover henna. She creased her eyebrows at me but left to get what I requested.

Upon her return, she gave me the bowl. I dipped the tip of a feather into the paste and firmly wrote on my hand.

राणाजी

“Ranaji[30]?” Suman frowned and asked, “Why didn't you write it yesterday?”

I pursed my lips, looked at the name, and said, “Because I felt like writing it now.” She looked at me, perplexed. Shifting my gaze toward the ladies present, I asked them to dress me up, and they began their work.

They criticized my outfit, and I slipped into the bridal red lehenga. However, I struggled to tie it around my waist. The exquisite embroidery made it too heavy to manage, so I had to ask a lady for help. I then put on the blouse, and one of them pulled the strings to secure a knot at my back.

“Tighter,” I instructed her, and laid my eyes on the reflection in the mirror.

Honestly, amidst everything that was happening, I momentarily forgot everything and appreciated the beauty of the bridal dress. It perfectly aligned with my curves, making my body look truly enticing.

We then proceeded with the jewelry. They helped me wear intricately designed gold bangles interspersed with red glass bangles, and they slid gold and gem rings onto my fingers.

“Nandani,” suddenly, Ruhani’s voice caught my ears, and I turned to look at her. She came and sat in front of me on a cushioned stool and asked me in a hurt voice,

“Why are you doing this, Nandani?” I swallowed a lump of emotion and said, “It is my wedding today.”

“But the king has left and has not come back yet,” she added in a frustrated tone, while I attempted to distract myself by wearing more rings and bangles.

“He will be back. He said he would,” but my unsettled self knew it wasn't true. The fear and anticipation of what would happen had me on edge. I couldn't sleep

well; I woke up early, and I didn't feel hungry or thirsty. My heart was in acute sorrow. The more I tried to hold myself together, the more I felt my peace shatter.

Honestly, I didn't care about the king. I was worried about Rudra. I wanted to know if he was okay and hoped to see him once. I knew he was furious about me spending the night with the king, but he had to understand that revenge is never the right solution. I knew that from now on, if he ever thought of revenge, he would realize how it ruins lives.

“Nandani,” suddenly, Ruhani's voice brought me out of my reverie, and I looked at her. “Take your decision back, please don't ruin your life,” she pleaded, and I shook my head.

“His upbringing differed totally from mine, under different circumstances. What I witnessed in his eyes the last time I met him was different from what I had ever seen in his eyes,” she scrunched her brows in wonder.

“What are you talking about?” she seemed dismayed.

I gave her a thin smile. “It is my wedding, Ruhani. You are my cousin, my best friend, and the only sister I have. Wouldn't you help me get ready? Wouldn’t you make me the most beautiful bride of the night?” She shook her head with glistening eyes and stood up from the stool.

“I will, of course I will,” she leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “I pray you find your peace as soon as possible.” Tears blurred my vision, and she helped me put on the heavy choker necklace, along with its set of earrings and the headpiece. Kneeling, she hooked the anklets.

“Stand up,” she said. Once I did, she hooked the waist chain around my waist and glanced at me. “You are looking so beautiful,” I smiled at her compliment. She then braided my hair and added gold hair accessories.

“Are you ready?” my mother asked, walking into my chamber, and I looked at her, smiling in content.

“Privacy,” she announced, and as soon as everyone in the room left, including Ruhani, she restlessly strode towards me and took a seat on the stool in front of me.

Inhaling a heavy breath, she said, “Rudra has attacked Suryagarh.” My heart dropped in my stomach when I heard her say that, and she went on to state further. “He tried to claim the throne, and our informant sent word that the king ran away in the middle of the battle for the throne,” I gulped, a huge lump forming in my throat, and asked in a trembly voice.

“He…he tried to claim the throne?” She nodded, holding my hands, and tears started pooling in my eyes. “Is he fine?” I cautiously asked.

“We don't know, there is no news of him,” she said, and my heartbeat escalated. I stared at her blankly.

“Nandani,” she called me softly. “I want to ask you something,” I nodded, gesturing to her to go ahead.

“If Rudra had already claimed the throne, it would be a critical situation for us now. If he has feelings for you, I think he will be here because he was planning to abduct you. Now, your father and I want to know, should we welcome him or prepare the army to stop him?”

I paid attention to her words and unhesitatingly replied, “Welcome him.”

“Are you sure?” She questioned.

“Yes. If I were to involve the army, I wouldn't have asked you to invite the king for the swayamvar. Regardless of what, I want a peace treaty between both kingdoms. And, this could be our chance to defeat him if he plans to attack us,” She shook her head.

“No, Nandani, it is not about defeat or victory. Your father and I can bring the entire world down for our children. We could tackle him before, we will now and will always,” she said. “But we allowed you to do all this on your own because you were finding it difficult to erase him from your memories, because we wanted the best for you, even if it is the man who tarnished our honour.”

She caressed my hands and added, “Your father and I have dealt with worse. This is nothing. No fight is bigger until you make it. And the way you crossed every limit, not caring about your pride, your title of being a princess, and how you went beyond worldly things, shows how much you loved him. I just want to know what you want. Keep all this political stuff aside and tell me what you want, just you?” she asked, holding my face.

The moments I spent with him crossed my mind, blurring my vision. “I want to talk to him,”

She inhaled a sharp breath and, looking at me, exclaimed, “No, Nandani. I’m asking if you want us to stop him or not.” I gulped, looking into her eyes.

“Maasa, I want to talk to him for once, please,”

She got up in frustration and said, “Nandani, it could be dangerous.”

“He is in pain,” I pleaded, sobbing brokenly. I couldn’t speak because I was too exhausted.

Suddenly, a knock on the door interrupted us.

Upon my mother opening the door, I heard faint screams from outside. Getting up from my chair, I watched Ruhani taking long strides toward me.

“Nandani, Rudra is here,” she stated in a frightened tone, dripping with shock.

“He is wounded… and bleeding… and, oh my god… he has a sword in his hand,” she huffed unevenly, and I dashed outside immediately, with my mother following suit.

“Nandani,” she ran after me, covering my head with the dupatta. I hurried toward the palace hall, descended the stairs and reached the royal garden, where the wedding altar stood.

Following the voices, I went near the mandap[31] and looked at him beside the priest. Blood covered him, soaking his clothes and spattering his sword.

My father stepped toward him, and he peered at me. Stepping down from the mandap, he sauntered toward me. Looking at his condition, tears clouded my vision, and I whimpered, “Rudra.” He did not spare me a glance, looking anywhere but at me.

“Rudra,” my father intervened, holding a sword in his hand, and asked, “What are you doing here?”

Turning to my father, he grumbled menacingly, “Your daughter, the Princess of Mahabaleshgarh, is promised to the King of Suryagarh.” Taking a step forward, he proclaimed, “I am the King of Suryagarh.”

My father looked at me in a dilemma, probably waiting for my signal. “I want to talk to him alone,” I muttered in a low tone, and he turned back to look at me.

Slowly, he held my wrist with his bloodied palm and walked us towards the mandap.

“Dare anyone disrupt the wedding and I will slit the throats,” He said, and I looked at my mother holding my father back, and to take him aside.

“Rudra, listen to me,” I held his hand on my wrist as he climbed the stairs.

“Vivaah ke mantroan ka ucchaaran aarambh kijiye, panditji,” (Start reciting the wedding vows, panditji[32]) he ordered, and I stared at his face.

He didn't even look at me, ignoring the tears streaming down my face. As the priest recited the vows, he clasped his sword. Following the priest’s words, he offered the mixture of dried herbs and leaves to the sacred fire, which was about to bind us in a holy bond of matrimony.

I watched my father run toward Ruhani's father and noticed Haider collapsing to the floor, with everyone screaming at him. Ruhani's husband picked him up and took him away. My father looked at me, but I gestured for him to stay put.

He was right. I was, in fact, promised to the King of Suryagarh for everyone's sake.

The apparent anger on his face scared me, me!

He did not look at me, not even once throughout the wedding.

Panditji then asked both of us to stand up for the saptapadi[33]. I saw his soldiers scattered around, holding naked swords.

We stood up to walk around the sacred fire, bound in an indissoluble matrimonial bond. The priest continued chanting the mantras[34] and reciting the promises we were to make to each other with each round we took.

His first vow was to always take care of me, our family, and the children we would have. And my first promise to him was to take care of the household and provide him and his family with pure and nourishing food.

In our second one, we promised to stand by each other no matter the circumstances.

With the third round, he promised to work unflaggingly to earn wealth for the family, and in return, I promised to manage and preserve that wealth to ensure its prosperity.

In the fourth one, he promised to entrust my decisions and choices regarding the household, and I vowed to strive to make the best home for us.

In the fifth round, he promised to consult me on all matters, and I, in return, promised to take part in and support him in all his endeavours.

Our sixth vow was to stay loyal and faithful to each other. Just when I finished, he scoffed, “Faithful.” He laughed without looking at me.

The priest spoke the last vow, in which he promised to fulfil and follow all the promises he had made throughout his life. I, too, promised to remember all the vows I took and fulfil them with all my heart.

“You both can take seats,” the priest said, handing him a small silver container filled with sindoor[36]. “Now, you may apply this vermilion on the bride’s hairline,”

I looked in my parents’ direction, who turned their eyes away from us, doing the final ritual. He pinched a good amount of sindoor between his fingers.

I blinked nervously as he filled my hairline with it, a little of which fell on my nose. Once, twice, thrice…. My body literally shivered at that moment. In the snap of a finger, I became someone else's. How simple yet complex the whole concept of a wedding was.

“The marriage is complete. I now, lawfully and ritually, pronounce you both husband and wife. You may take the blessings of your elders,” the priest said.

He instantly stood up from his place and stepped down from the altar. Wearing his footwear, he said in a low tone, “You have time till morning,” and left.

My mother walked towards me and helped me get down the mandap to take me to my chamber. Ruhani, her mother, Suman and my grandmother followed us too.

She made me sit on the couch and passed me a glass of water. With trembling hands, I held it and drank. My mother knelt before me and told me to put my feet forward. When I did, she gently slid toe rings on two middle toes in both my feet.

I was married! The realisation struck me like thunder, and tears brimmed in my eyes.

“Why didn't you let your father intervene?” my mother slowly asked me with tearful eyes.

I turned my gaze down, fidgeting with my dupatta, and answered, “I have so many people who can lift me when I fall, but he has no one. If I were to stand against him, he would never be able to give life a second chance. He wouldn’t be able to turn himself into a better person.”

My grandmother sat beside me and held my hands. Kissing them softly, she smiled and looked at me. “He is not that bad, you know. I see another Raj in him,” I chuckled, listening to her, tears streaming down my face. My mother sat on my other side and hugged me tightly.

“Keep sending letters to us. You will have many things to be responsible for in the new kingdom. Being a queen would not be easy,” I smiled weakly at her, and, closing my eyes, I nodded. “Of course, I will,”

Ruhani sat before me and held my hands. Smiling, she muttered slowly, “I hope everything will go well.” I blinked at her in assurance.

I was giving everyone hope, smiling to prevent anyone from worrying, but I was terrified and anxious, and I dreaded it from within. His failure to look at me even once while mocking the vow of ‘faith’ felt so strange, as if he wasn’t the Rudra I knew but a completely different person.

“Nandani,” Suddenly, my father's voice made me turn to look towards the chamber entrance. He walked in holding a food platter, and my mother moved away to let him sit beside me.

Giving a thin smile, he said, “Time for dinner.” I nodded with wobbly lips and burst into loud cries. He immediately hugged me, and I saw my father shedding tears for the first time. He patted my head and kissed the side of my head.

“Mahabaleshgarh was your home and will always be your home. You can come here anytime you want; no one will question you. Remember, whether good or bad times, we will always support you, my little princess.” I nodded, sobbing in his embrace like a little girl, his little girl, my heart breaking.

“Shhh… stop crying, or people might think I’m starving you,” I giggled through tears, listening to him. He smiled, saying, “Consider this your vacation. Now, you will need energy to cry. So let’s eat,” I burst into laughter, and he moved the plate forward.

Beginning with him, everyone in the room fed me one after another, except for Suman, because she was coming with me.

Once I had completed everything on the plate, everybody left, asking me to rest until my departure, leaving me alone with my mother.

“Nandani, you are mature enough and even married now,” she spoke hesitantly, and I listened intently.

“What is it?” She was fumbling with her words.

“But as your mother, I should…. I must tell you that… I mean, apart from love, marriage is about many other things,” I frowned at her, not understanding what she was trying to say. I shook my head in confusion. “I mean, you love Rudra, and whatever he did made us believe that he loves you too, but you see, marriage is not just about love. There’s more to it, like physical intimacy... Since you talk so much with Ruhani, I hope you understand what I'm getting at,”

My cheeks heated up in embarrassment, and I instantly nodded, looking down. “Yeah… yeah, yes, I mean, yes, I do have an idea,” I smiled nervously.

She visibly relaxed at my reply and leaned forward to hug me. “May god give you my happiness too,”

The night grew darker, but I didn't sleep. Instead, I met everyone before my farewell. I talked to everyone one last time: my helpers, teachers, cooking companions, friends and the little children I loved playing with.

By the time I was done meeting everyone, it was morning already. The birds chirping reminded me of me flying away from my nest—my home—to a new home.

My parents, all the relatives, and family members walked towards the main entrance to see me off. I looked at him, waiting outside for me with his back turned to my side.

“Nandani,” my grandmother pulled me into a warm hug, and we both burst into intense cries.

My voice quavered as I tried to say, “Please take care of yourself, and take the medicinal herbs on time. I have instructed your attendees on everything, and if they do not behave well, just write to me, okay?” She caressed my head and kissed my forehead.

“You, too, take care of yourself. I have others here,”

“I don't trust anyone for you,” I hiccuped, and she gave me a weak smile, kissing my fingers.

“May god bless you with all the happiness,” I hugged her again and went to my mother. She hugged me tightly.

“Please take care of yourself. Write to us if you need anything. Never think twice before telling us about anything and everything, Nandani. May god bless you, my little child,” she muttered between her sobs.

“You too take care of yourself, Maasa,” she nodded, and I moved towards my father. He engulfed me in his arms.

“Sadeiv smaran rakhna, garv hai aap humaara,” (Remember that you’re my pride). I nodded, and he kissed my forehead.

“Apna dhyaan rakhiyega baapusa,” (Please take care of yourself), I muttered, holding onto him a little longer.

I then hugged Ruhani, and we both burst into tears. “Please visit me whenever possible,” I nodded, pulling away from the hug.

Holding her hands, I said, “Even with a candle in your hand, if you search, you will not find a man as loyal and loving as your husband in the whole world. Just like this, be happy, always,” She gave me a pleasing smile and hugged me again.

I met my Buaa then, and she cried, hugging me. “You are such a brave child, Nandani.” She kissed my forehead and cupped my cheeks adoringly.

“Always remember, the future is what you make. Never allow him to overpower you; a relationship works when both are equal. You love him so much now, but trust me when he falls, he'll fall harder... speaking with experience,” she advised with a gentle smile, and I nodded.

“Take care, Buaasa,” I said, looking at Ruhani's father standing beside her.

He adoringly touched my head and said, “God bless you!!! Give it a try, if it does not work, we’ll just kill him together,” I burst into laughter. He spoke like my father. He, too, laughed.

“Nandani,” I looked at Haider. He smiled, handing me a box.

“This is for you,” I said, looking at him, wondering what was inside. “Open it after you reach your new home,” I nodded and remembered something to ask him.

“What happened to you last night?”

Suddenly, his face turned pale, and he blabbed nervously. “Nothing, I was okay, I was perfectly fine,” I furrowed my eyebrows and nodded.

I felt my mother's hand on my shoulder as she walked towards the palanquin. I wept inconsolably, and I found my father telling him something. I noticed that he wasn’t saying anything, not even looking at him.

She helped me settle into the palanquin, and the men carried it up. The cavalcade proceeded, and I sneaked out of the carriage’s window to look at my family. My father was hugging my mother, and I smiled with tears, looking at everyone. Soon, their sight began fading as we moved farther from my empire.

The footsteps of the people walking and the horses' clip-clopping calmed my mind, and I fell into a slumber.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

“Nandani,” I woke up when someone patted my hands. “We've reached,” Suman filled me in with the information and offered her hand to help me out of the palanquin.

The sound of my anklets jingled as I stepped out.

I had my face completely covered with the veil. But through the transparent fabric of my dupatta, I could see the magnificent edifice, highly fortified with thick red sandstone and marble walls.

I was stunned by the sheer size and opulence compared to my empire.

Stepping forward, I gazed at the massive wooden doors of the palace entrance as they slowly opened. I stood beside him as he awaited me at the front door.

When the doors opened, I gasped; my heart pulsated in pure terror, and my feet and palms turned cold. Turning away from the sight, I closed my eyes.

What was that?!

My wrist was held from behind, and I turned around to the sight of blood. Red everywhere.

Tears rolled down my face as I raked my eyes through the colonnade, blood splattered on the pillars, pooled around the wounded, writhing soldiers on the floor. They were weeping in pain, some lying lifeless on the ground, some helping the others.

He walked ahead, while I had my feet nailed to the ground, because my eyes had never witnessed something as barbarous as that.

He did all of that?!

The thought made me want to run away, someplace far, because I couldn't bear to look at hundreds of people bleeding to death.

While I stood traumatised at the place, he picked me up in his arms, catching me off guard. I shook my head. To say I was scared would be an understatement. I was beyond petrified.

When did he become so callous and cold-blooded? Words hung in my throat as I didn't know such a side of him existed.

He put me down when the massacre place was away from our range of vision.

“How dare you?” Suddenly, a woman’s voice rang through the empty corridors, and I turned to see an old lady approaching us, accompanied by a group of attendants.

“Rudra,” she yelled at him, and a frightening shiver ran down my spine when she delivered a stinging slap right on his cheek.

“How dare you?” She wrenched his kurta in anger, and I saw him standing still in front of her with his eyes set down to the floor. “I told you not to do this. I warned you about the destruction it would cause: people will go against you. Thousands of soldiers are now wounded because of you. How could you be so heartless? You put your life in danger along with thousands of others, just for the throne,” she slapped him again and held his face to make him look at her.

“What were you thinking?” Her voice cracked, and she coughed because of all the crying. Her footsteps faltered, and he immediately stretched his hand to hold her.

“Badi Maa,” He called her, but she stopped him from stepping closer.

“Don't touch me. You are a king now; I don't think someone like me belongs here.” His face fell at her comment.

“Please don't say that, Badi Maa,” He said, and she knelt on the floor, holding her head.

“You have made so many people stand against you now. I told you to wait—wait until he died. You were the only hereditary successor. So why did you do all this?” she complained in a weak voice. I looked at him kneeling before her, holding her, as he voiced his concern.

“You need to see the physician,” she fainted, and he immediately lifted her in his arms and walked away in a hurry.

“Someone, call the vaidya,” He screamed and took her inside, while I just stood there not understanding anything. I was just trying to comprehend things when someone called me from behind.

“Please come with me, Ranisa[35], I will take you to your chamber.” I looked at a girl standing with her head bowed down, accompanied by two more girls, as she politely offered help, and I nodded.

They guided me through the corridors adjoining the palace's main building, accompanied by the others. The entire palace was divided into seven sections, each with its own entry gate and courtyard, connecting to another in a circle. We passed through all the galleries and finally reached a serene and uncrowded area of the palace.

It was entirely different from other buildings, nestled in a vast, beautiful, and well-kept garden, resembling a small palace, yet it was immensely large and spacious.

"Up here, Ranisa." The attendees guided me as I climbed the stairs. The cool breeze coursed through the open courtyard at the chamber entrance, and I felt relaxed as the freshness of the air calmed my insides.

"This is your chamber, Ranisa," the attendee assisting me said, and I lifted my veil to look around.

The chamber's foyer resembled a dome, rising high on robust white sandstone pillars, adorned with an intricate motif design carved into the stone roof. It exuded a divine and positive atmosphere.

Massive wooden doors opened, and I stepped inside through the entryway. A grand, circular hall sat in the chamber's heart, with doors opening to the other adjoining parts.

Unlike the outer architect, the interior was crafted from marble, with the overhead ceiling and pillars intricately sculpted and vibrantly painted in shades of gold, red, and blue. This detailing accentuated the floral patterns in the stone, giving the entire chamber an exquisite appearance. A grand chandelier hung at the center, adorned with crystals and glass carvings, designed to hold lanterns.

It seemed to be the main guest chamber, with numerous couches arranged, plush carpets to walk on, and tables in the center. More ornate chandeliers hung from the ceiling, smaller than the one in the middle, with curved arms to hold candles that would illuminate the entire room. Candlesticks were placed on an altar-like design in every corner of the chamber.

To my left, the hallways guided me to an enormous door that opened onto a library with couches and tables arranged for sitting and reading. It was packed. Wouldn't it be too hot, with no windows and only the door for open space?! Lamps and candles had to be lit even during the day. I noticed thousands of books neatly arranged on the wooden shelves. A couple of book titles caught my eye, and I smiled at finding a few familiar ones. It was serene.

Ambling further in the same direction, I entered another part, in the middle of which I saw a small pavilion-like structure, and the space at its center was empty for the idol to be placed. It seemed like a prayer room, filled with sunlight streaming in from the latticed windows. I found it truly seraphic.

When I moved to the next room, I saw it was lined with large trunks arranged on both sides, probably filled with clothes and spare items to be used in the chamber.

Rolled rugs and carpets were hoarded in the corner of the room. Perhaps it was a storage room, because it seemed seldom visited.

The room adjacent to it was a place where all kinds of weapons were marshalled, for practising and working out, I figured. It had a sand sack fastened to the room's roof in the middle, and the surface differed from the whole chamber. What caught my eye was another door, which opened to the back side of the vast garden.

Turning back, I exited the room and made my way to the next part. An open courtyard adjoined the garden, featuring velvety carpets on the floor, where the rising sun brightened the entire space. It looked so peaceful and relaxing, like a place where one could spend time in nature. Basking in the sun's warmth, hearing birds chirping, and enjoying games in the morning, feeling the cool night breeze and celestial view of the moon and stars with books at night—a perfect idea of unwinding the day.

I went back inside and reached the next room. *A sleeping chamber, finally!!!* I heaved out.

A giant bed stood in the center of the room, flanked by candlesticks on either side of the table. Three layers of curtains enveloped the bed, providing privacy for rest and blocking out any noise or disturbance. It felt magical. The silk bed sheets and quilt invited me to slip into a peaceful slumber. On the far right side of the bed, ornate windows showcased a panoramic view of the sprawling garden in all its glory.

"This way, Ranisa," the lady showed me the way towards the attached door in the chamber. Attendants guiding me opened the door, and in front of me was a passageway that led me to a room divided into two sections across from each other.

To my left was a door that opened to a dressing room, where I spotted almirahs and smaller trunks perfectly aligned on one side. A colossal wooden dressing table stood in the center, accompanied by its settee, while sun rays intruded through the ceiling-high windows, radiating light throughout the room on the other side.

Across the dressing room was the bathing room. These chamber sections provided a private space to retreat to after bathing.

I walked out of the bedroom and scanned the entire place while standing in a corner. It resembled a blooming flower with nine petals, which connected the guest chamber to the other rooms through the hallways in a circular pattern. Only the practice area and the courtyard had access to the garden at the back, along with the foyer at the entrance.

My eyes fell on the ninth part, which was…. locked?!

"What is this room?" I asked, looking at the attendants.

"We don't know. Only the old king can access this part," she informed me, and I nodded.

"So, you do not know what's inside?" She shook her head, and I scrutinised my gaze at the locked doors. What could it be?

“You should rest, Ranisa,” suddenly an attendee suggested. We walked back to the bedroom, and I sat on the bed.

“You must be hungry, Ranisa. Should I bring something for you to eat?” one of them asked, and I smiled, looking at her. She was so hospitable and polite. I shook my head and asked, keeping my voice soft.

“I want to have a word with Ranaji. Can you please convey this message to him?” She remained quiet for a moment but then nodded, “Yes.” She left, and I looked at Suman, who was looking at me.

“I think there is some issue with the Badi Maa here,” I inhaled a sharp breath and nodded.

“There are so many things I have yet to discover,” she nodded. “But first things first, I need to meet Chandramukhi, the viper.”

She frowned at me and asked, “Who's that?” I got up from the bed, giving her a thin smile, and walked towards the mirror to look at myself, adjusting my nose ring.

“She is the reason why all of this—”

“PRIVACY,”

I was startled by the sudden intrusion. Goosebumps rose on my skin upon hearing his authoritative tone, and I turned around to find him standing in the doorway of the room.

All the attendants left the chamber at his order, and I walked towards him, gulping in fear, looking at his clothes stained with blood, his whole body injured. Visuals of the wounded soldiers crossed my mind as I looked at his wounds.

Standing in front of him, I tried to hold his bleeding hand, but he pulled away. My heart panged at his cold behaviour.

“It would've been better if you had kidnapped me rather than this,” I spoke in a low tone, trying to hold his hand again, but he pulled it away once more.

“You’re bleeding, Rudra,” I sobbed under my breath, and he looked back at me.

“You made me do this.” A lone tear escaped my eyes as he blankly exclaimed, and I shook my head.

“No, your thirst for revenge made you do that,” he chuckled at my remark.

“You know what, I hate you,” he gritted.

My steps faltered back as he trudged closer to me, fury flaming in his eyes. “You people only care about yourselves. I thought you were different, but you…. You turned out even worse. What were you saying? That you love me? No…. You never did, never. You're all the same, playing with people, like they’re a pawn in your game.”

Hearing his words weakened me; tears pooled in my eyes, my courage slowly slipped away, but I remained persistent and questioned him, “So, why did you marry me?”

He took a deep breath.

“You were the only person I ever liked, so I used you to get the only thing I wanted. I told you to marry someone else. But no, you paid no heed to my words. You kept getting on my nerves and went on sleeping with a man I wholeheartedly hate, for the sake of revenge,” he fisted his palms, as if trying to control himself.

“If I could use the only person I liked, ‘liked’, to seek what I want. Can you imagine what I would have done if I had wanted you? You made me burn all of this for which I patiently waited for more than twenty years of my life, just for you. You made me ruin everything, and therefore, here’s my eighth promise to you, Ranisa,” the way he clenched his jaw so hard while saying those things made me feel how furious he was.

“I promise you, I shall never be yours. Never, ever. That’s how much I hate you now. You were so desperate to ruin me, to become the Queen of Suryagarh, you slept with a man whom I despised. Now, you are the Queen of Suryagarh. Sleep with whoever you want. I'll never be yours. Never!” He had my arms clasped in a tight grip. I pushed him away with all my might and slapped him.

“You were ready to sleep with me for your revenge, that was right. But when I slept with someone for my revenge, that was wrong. How so, Rudra?” Suddenly, he pulled me closer, seizing my hair in his palm.

“I didn't stop you from sleeping with anyone. I told you to find a man you deserved. But, clearly, that's not what you wanted. All you wanted was to take away what was meant for me. And, you did, you won, but you lost me, Ranisa,” he sneered at my face, and I blinked, trying to hold back the tears.

“You are hurting me, Rudra,” he scoffed, glowering at my eyes.

“It’s hurting? Just with this? Ever imagined what I felt my whole life, losing everyone? Your parents killed the only hope of my life, my father. Fate took my mother away from me, my childhood, my siblings, everyone, everything.”

I wriggled in his hands, quivering. “Years ago, my father did the same thing you did today. My mother was tricked into a marriage alliance by your father. So my father protected her from getting married to an old man just the way you protected me from getting married to your old uncle,”

He pulled my face closer to his and spat with extreme agitation, “I was protecting you until you stepped into his damn chamber and slept with him,”

I couldn't listen to the hatred dripping from his mouth, and so I immediately remarked, “When you can stoop so low as to sleep with me for your supposed revenge, I, too, can sleep with anybody for my revenge. Do not forget, you started this, Rudra.”

He let me go with a jerk and silently observed my face for a few seconds. I could tell by looking at him that my remark didn't appeal to him. But he said nothing and retreated a few steps.

Tears streamed down my face as I looked at him, leaving me alone. I sat on the bed and wondered why he just couldn't understand. Why is it acceptable when a

man does it for revenge, but when a woman does, it's wrong?

“Ranisa,” Suddenly, an attendee walked into the chamber, and I washed away my tears, standing up.

“Badi Ranisa has come to meet you,” she informed me. I furrowed my brows but nodded anyway and followed her. She took me to the guest chamber, where Badi Ranisa was waiting for me.

I saw her seated on the couch, with the attendants standing behind her, holding large plates draped with velvety cloths. She noticed me and stood up from her seat. I was hesitant, but I approached her to touch her feet. She gently touched my head to bless me.

“Pranaam Badi Ranisa,” I greeted her, joining my palms, and she lifted the veil I pulled down on my way to meet her.

“Call me Badi Maa, Rudra calls me that. I’m his aunt,” I nervously nodded my head and looked down, “Ji.”

“What's your name?” She asked, “Ji, Nandani,”

“Nandani…. such a beautiful name. Pardon me for my behaviour earlier. Why don't you freshen up for the welcome prayers as the new bride of the Kingdom,” she suggested in the softest tone, and I nodded again. “Ji,”

“Also, he didn't tell me anything about the wedding. Why so abruptly?” She questioned, and I blinked anxiously.

“Badi maa, I don't think it's my place to say anything right now. Ranaji should be the one to tell you everything,” she smiled at my response.

“You know him so well,” I gulped, lowering my gaze.

“He is getting ready. Come with him to the prayer hall,” I nodded, and she turned around to leave. Suddenly, she stopped and said, “Oh yes, these presents are for you, my dear. The attendants will guide you on when to wear them,” I nodded.

They placed plates on the tables. She left, and I plopped on the couch, heaving a sigh. Everything he said kept ringing in my head like bells.

“Nandani, you should freshen up,” Suman said, and I nodded. I got up, and my new attendants assisted me in reaching the bathing room. They helped me remove all my jewellery, keeping it safe on a plate, and I stripped off my dress to take a quick bath.

I changed into one of the dresses his aunt had brought me, and the attendees helped me put all my jewellery back on because I couldn't take it off until my wedding night. Once I finished getting ready, I moved towards the guest chamber again and saw him waiting there on the couch.

Seeing me, he instantly rose to his feet and said, “Come.” I strode behind him, pulling my veil down, and joined him in walking through the galleries and gardens to reach the main prayer hall of the palace.

I found Badi Maa and a priest waiting for us. I greeted both of them.

“Please sit here,” the priest said, pointing to the seats before the holy fire. He began chanting mantras for the yagya and asked us to offer a few herbs to the sacred fire.

“Now, both of you, pray to the deity.” We both stood before god to seek blessings. I closed my eyes, joining my palms,

‘O dear God, nothing is possible in this world without your guidance. Our life in this world is your blessing, and so I am all dependent on you, because I’ve faith in you. Whatever you do, you'll do it right.’

After serving prayers, I touched the feet of Badi Maa and the priest. I turned to his side to touch his feet, but he stopped me mid-way, holding my shoulders. He awkwardly retreated his hands away from my shoulders, and Badi Maa pulled my veil up and looked at him.

She brought the pooja thaali, arranged with vermilion, turmeric, and rice, to him, and I turned my lashes south, feeling giddy when he applied a pinch of vermilion to my hairline. He rubbed my nose with his little finger, probably to clean the vermilion on my nose.

“May god bless you both,” Badi Maa said, and she looked at him. “Your wife has not told me, but I want to know why. Why did you do this?” He abruptly took his steps back and said,

“It was nothing, Badi Maa,” I looked down as she turned her gaze to me. “Now, you should take some rest. I'll have both of your dinners sent to your chamber,” I walked closer to her and held her hands.

“Badi Maa, I don't like elders working for me.” She smiled at me and gently cupped my cheek.

“I’ll let you do the work when it's time,” I nodded, pursing my lips. “By the way, did I tell you how beautiful you are?” I blushed at her compliment.

“Thank you so much,”

“Now, head back to your chamber,” She said. We both stepped out of the prayer hall with the attendants to return to our chambers, but suddenly, he changed his direction and walked in another direction without saying a word.

The attendants, Suman and I, returned to my chamber, and I lay on the bed, staring at the delicate designs of the ceiling.

I didn't know when sleep took over me, but I woke up when Suman called me. “Nandani, it’s evening already. I think you should wake up.” I nodded at her and stepped out of bed.

Walking towards the mirror, I adjusted my jewellery, hair, and dress, when an attendee brought me food.

“Your dinner is here, Ranisa,” I turned around to her and asked her in a low tone, “Where is Ranaji?”

Well, yeah, ‘Ranaji’. I couldn’t call him by his name unless we were alone. We weren't allowed to call our husbands by their names. But since I had always called

him by his name, it was tricky to address him as a king. My first step to change after marriage was to stop taking his name in front of others.

“Ranaji is busy with the wounded soldiers. He is helping with their dressings.”

I nodded and asked her, “Has he eaten yet?” She shook her head. “No, Ranisa, he hasn't,”

Though my stomach was rumbling in hunger, it was my first day after the wedding, and it would be inappropriate to eat before he did, especially when he was busy taking care of the soldiers.

I remembered that he once told me how he always ate after every soldier was well-fed. And I was sure, becoming a King wouldn’t bring any change to that.

“Please take the food back. I will wait for him,” I said. She nodded, leaving, and I sat on the couch.

“Suman, sit,” I patted the place beside me, and she asked me slowly.

“What are you thinking?” She asked, and I gave a genuine answer.

“I want to help the soldiers, too. They are wounded, but being a new bride, wouldn't it be too soon to interfere in the matters of the Kingdoms?” I said. She agreed with my point.

“Yes, you're right. Added to that, we don't know who has what kind of intentions towards you,” I nodded and walked towards the window. The moon glowed and the stars glimmered in the night sky, lulling my distressed insides.

I missed my family. There were so many people back home I could talk to. However, I didn’t have anyone here. Since I didn't feel hungry, I told Suman to go to bed, but when I didn't hear her reply, I turned to find her asleep on the couch.

I smiled at her; she must've been tired from all the travelling, so I let her be and covered her with the comforter.

I walked out to the courtyard of the chamber to get some fresh air. Flambeaus and all the lamps were blown out, and no one was around.

When I reached there, I found him lying on his front on the floor. My sight fell on the covered food platter with a bowl of medicinal paste beside it. His upper body wasn't covered, and my heart pained seeing so many wounds all over, some minor but some really deep cuts.

I went closer and sat beside him. Taking the bowl in my hands, I dipped my fingers in the herbal paste and very carefully applied it to his wounds, so as not to wake him up or inflict even a little pain.

I have treated injuries for many people, but my expertise didn’t help when it came to him, as my hands were trembling so much. Yet I tried to do it right, and suddenly, a soft gasp escaped my lips when I found his eyes open. He was staring quietly outside at the moon.

“You don't have to do this,” He mumbled, but I kept doing my work.

“It is my duty and my right because we’re husband and wife now,”

“Bhojan kyu nahi kiya abhi tak?” (Why haven't you eaten yet?) He asked in a low voice, and I replied, ***“Aapne bhi to nahi kiya,”*** (You haven't either)

He took a deep breath and slowly turned onto his back. I looked at his naked, wounded body. In the dim light of the moon, his features stood out so prominently that I couldn't help but ogle at his fine abs and muscular arms. Sweeping my gaze down his midriff, I observed the visible veins on his lower abdomen.

While applying the paste on a deep gash on his abdomen, I asked him in a soft tone, “Why didn't you get your wounds treated?”

He closed his eyes briefly and muttered, “I will, once all my soldiers get their wounds dressed.”

He slowly moved his hand to grasp my wrist. The tinkling sound of bangles echoed in the quiet courtyard as he gently pulled my hands to examine my henna-stained palm more closely.

Suddenly, he yanked my hand away and was about to leave, but I immediately held his hand and pleaded feebly, “Ranaji, I can't eat before you, not at least on our first day of marriage. Please have some food for me.” He looked me in the eyes and sighed before sitting back on the carpet. Taking the plate near him, he formed a morsel and extended his hand in my direction.

“You don't have to do this,” He said, and I opened my mouth to have the food. He kept feeding me until I finished two rotis. He did not eat, nor did I insist. After helping me drink water, he lay back in his place.

I applied the paste to the leftover wounds—on his abs, his chest, the side of his waist, his arms, and one on his wrist. There was a deep cut on his neck, for which I had to move closer and lean against his shoulders. His eyes were closed, but the moment my fingers touched his skin, he opened them.

A jolt of shiver ran down my spine when he looked into my eyes, and I blinked nervously as he whispered, “You cannot seduce me.”

“I’m not,” I instantly breathed out.

“So why are you here? You should be in bed.”

I took a deep breath and remarked, “I should be where my husband is.”

He moved my hand away from him, and looking intensely into my eyes, he said, “I don't sleep in chambers or over the beds.”

I put the bowl aside and said, “So it's fixed then, I too will sleep here on the floor.”

He clenched his jaw, “No, you are not. Go back and sleep in your chamber, on the bed,” he ordered.

I shook my head and removed the dupatta from my head. “You do not tell me what to do or what not to,” I commented, looking at him while I removed my earrings and placed them in a corner.

He was watching my every move closely and proclaimed, “It gets colder at night.”

I moved my hand behind my neck to remove my necklace and retorted, “That’s fine, I'd love to shiver to death in the cold.” I was trying to remove the knot of my necklace piece, but couldn't. I kept my hands down and sighed in annoyance.

Turning my back on him, I said, “Please help me with this. The attendants are asleep already,”

He sighed and waited for a few moments. Then, he brought his hands near my nape and carefully removed the knot without touching me. I took it off my neck and kept it near my earrings.

Turning back, I lay beside him and rested my head on the floor. It was uncomfortable, especially with the heavy clothes and jewellery on. He turned to the other side, facing the garden, and I closed my eyes.

After many months, I finally felt at peace. I didn't know if it was right or wrong, but it was calming.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The velvety carpets suddenly felt cold in the middle of the night, like a hard marble floor. I tucked my feet into my lehenga in an attempt to seek warmth, but it was futile. The cool, biting wind crept through the thick fabric of my dress, stinging my skin and causing me to shiver, my teeth clattering, and my nose going numb.

I changed my position and turned to his side, only to face his back. It was dark, and I didn’t want to get up, so I tried to cocoon myself in my dupatta, but nothing helped.

Giving up, I sighed in displeasure and quietly tiptoed towards the sleeping chamber, not wanting to disturb Suman. Fetching a blanket, I returned and crouched in the direction he was facing.

I covered him with the blanket, when he mocked in a sleepy tone, “Someone's feeling cold, huhh,” I gritted my teeth at his remark.

He was enjoying it!

Ignoring him, I lay back facing him. I shifted closer to get into the comforter and mumbled in a low tone, “It is your duty to protect your wife, even if it’s from the cold, gusty winds,” and suddenly he pulled me closer to him by my waist, making me place my head over his upper arm.

I gasped at his abrupt action, but relaxed anyway and nestled my face in his chest.

He placed his legs near mine and covered us with the comforter. Though our midriffs were in distance, his hand was draped around my form, and I was in his embrace. Safe and calm.

I heaved out a smile; This was it. This was what I wanted.

No matter how much we fought, I wanted it to end by nightfall. We could play the king and queen for the world outside in daylight, but I wanted us to be Rudra-

Nadani, lying in each other’s arms at night—just us, no hatred, no arguments.

In his comforting and warm hold, I fell asleep.

I woke early from my deep slumber and looked outside at the garden. It wasn't completely dark; the purple hues of the sky signified the imminent sunrise.

Taking a deep breath, I yawned, trying to stretch my body, but his arm around my midriff prevented me from doing so. I might've changed sides at night because his limbs were entangled with mine from behind.

But the moment I tried to move out of his clasp, a sharp pain shot through my spine, causing me to crinkle my eyes. I pursed my lips to suppress a scream.

Oh My God!!!

I tried to look at him over my shoulder, but it hurt so bad, I couldn't move.

Inhaling a deep breath, he moved his arm off and opened his eyes. He stared at me for a few moments and turned his gaze away.

I tried to get up, but my spine felt so stiff. “Aahhhh….” I hollered in excruciating pain and placed my hand on my back. He chuckled, looking at me crying in pain.

He was finding it amusing?! Seriously?

“How's your wedding night experience, little wife?” he mocked.

I shot a glare his way for making fun of me. He got up and said, “Have your back massaged by someone.” He said, walking out of there with an absurd expression.

I lay back in the same place, closing my eyes. I couldn't even sit. The side of my waist and my midriff were hurting too.

He knew it! He knew it would hurt.

I took deep breaths, slowly trying to get up and walked back to the chamber with the comforter. I had my hand on my back and noticed Suman waking up. After placing the comforter, I closed my eyes in pain and swiftly settled myself onto the bed.

Tears pooled in my eyes, and Suman hurriedly paced towards me. “Nandani, what happened? Are you alright?”

I shook my head and muttered, “My back hurts so much. My whole body is in pain,” She frowned and suddenly a look of familiarity crossed her face.

“Where'd you sleep? The bed is untouched,” I looked at her face, turning pale.

“On the courtyard's floor. He was asleep there, so I had to sleep with him,” she widened her eyes.

“You did it on the floor? Was he angry? Was it rough? Was he not gentle? I mean, I hope it wasn't painful. Do you understand what I'm saying? Because it's wrong to hurt your wife. I mean, I know he's huge, strong and has a really fine body, but who makes love like that? Who makes his queen cry?” Her incoherent gibberish was getting on my nerves.

“Suman, shut up, just… stop..” I hissed through my clenched teeth. “It’s not what you think. And, stop observing him, he's my husband.”

She dropped her gaze and softly mumbled, “I didn't mean that, Nandani.” I cried in pain.

“Ouch….” She gave me a concerned look and asked, “Should I call the physician?” I shook my head.

“No, the way you misunderstood, everyone in the palace will. I don't want anyone talking about us on my first day here,” she nodded.

“So, what’re you going to do now?”

Inhaling a sharp breath, I said, “I'll wait and see if the pain subsides by night, if not, I'll get a massage.”

“Ranisa,” an attendee called, standing at the doorways of the bedchamber, and we looked her way. “Badi Ranisa has asked you to get ready for the first-meal ritual,” she informed me, and I nodded.

“Okay, I’ll be there in some time.” She was about to leave when I stopped her. “Wait? Do you know where Ranaji is? I mean, what does he do after waking up, on a routine basis?”

With her head bowed down, she politely replied, “He went towards his old quarters.” I furrowed my brows in a daze.

“Old quarters?” she nodded. “Can you take me there?” I asked, and she looked hesitant.

“But Ranisa, these servant quarters are for men. Women are not allowed there.”

Getting up from the bed, I walked towards her and said, “I’m the Queen, so take me to these quarters.” She nodded and turned towards the exit.

“Please come with me, Ranisa,” I followed her out of the chamber and meandered through the colonnades and the royal gardens, where at a distance my sight fell on a remote building shielded by the royal palace, the servant quarters.

“This way, Ranisa,” the soldiers immediately moved aside, making way for me, standing in a line on both sides.

My steps froze in place when my sight fell on him, seated on a stool in the open bathing area, in just his dhoti[36], visible to everyone. His back facing me, he filled the brass pot, emptying the water on his head.

His wounds were still fresh, and some of them were even bleeding.

I felt a knot in my stomach, looking at him, half-naked, taking a bath in the common area.

I caught the female attendants who came with me staring at him. Hundreds of soldiers were present, as it was open to everyone.

Stopping the attendees from following me, I dawdled in his direction, the sound of my anklet’s bells echoing in the hushed surroundings. I stepped near him and looked at his wet body.

Opening his eyes, he found me standing in front of him. Scanning me from top to bottom, he returned his gaze to my face and looked at me so intensely, as if he wanted to tear me apart. I felt my heart drop into my stomach.

"Ekaant!" (Privacy) I ordered.

All the attendants and soldiers left from there at his order, but I was rooted in my spot. I raked my eyes through the empty compound and, bringing my gaze back, I crept closer to him.

"You should bathe in the royal chambers, Ranaji," I said, and I didn't know why, but every time I addressed him as Ranaji, a sense of respect, pride of being his wife and timidness seeped through my insides.

He emptied another pot of water on his head, and a few drops splashed over my arms and face. "Habits cannot be changed overnight," He stated.

Blinking nervously, I countered, "We're meant to share everything as per our wedding vows. And so, I can't bathe in the open area."

Suddenly, he stretched his hand out to me, confusing me.

I didn't know what he wanted to do, so I placed my palm over his. He slowly pulled me closer and made me sit across from him, on my knees. My skirt was drenched on the wet floor.

All my courage flowed down the floor when he looked so deeply into my eyes, like he could see my soul. My heart pounded terribly against my ribs, making my breathing uneven.

I saw him filling another pot with water, and he steadily emptied it over my head. And the moment the cold water came into contact with my body, a jolt of shiver passed through my entire form, making me suck in heavy gasps of air and close my eyes.

It felt like thousands of flowers bloomed inside me, tickling me endlessly, making my whole body tremble.

Opening my eyes, I blinked at him frantically. I was cowering under his piercing gaze. Even though I was dressed completely, he looked at me like he had ripped my clothes off my body and was witnessing me naked.

The wild thought made me feel so hot; I immediately lowered my lashes.

Standing up from his place, he held out his hand. Holding it, I stood up.

I remembered that when I told him I was ready to live in a simple cottage with him, I had never imagined life would be so difficult.

He walked me toward a small room nearby and opened the door. As he took me inside, he locked the door, and I lifted my gaze to look at him. "I... I just came…to ask what you would like to have for breakfast," I was stammering terribly with my words.

He turned away from the door to look at me and asked, "Did you get your back massaged?" Stepping forward, he towered over me, and I distractedly took my steps back.

“No,” I mumbled, shaking my head.

“Why?” He arched his brow, taking another step closer, and I stumbled back further. He moved even closer when suddenly my back hit the open shelves.

I made an effort to look into his eyes and muttered, “I was afraid that the attendants might start tattling about us.”

He moved his gaze off me, skimming the almirah behind, “Why so?” he asked.

I gulped, looking at the water dripping down his neck, and tried to form an answer, “They might think that I hurt my back and my body was in pain because I slept with you last night.”

He took a dark red shawl from the almirah and looked back at me. “But you did sleep with me,” he said.

I nodded. “Yes, but it was our wed… our first night together after our marriage. So, they might get things wrong. And I didn't want them to gossip about us,” He nodded, unfolding the shawl, and draped it around me.

“I eat anything that's made, I sleep on the floor, I drink the milk that I get from the cows, I wash my clothes, I stay here and my life is... simple,” he said, and I blinked nervously, lowering my gaze.

“I should stay here with you,”

Taking a small glass bottle out of the almirah, he replied, “You don't have to,” he said in a deep, authoritative tone. “Turn around,” he demanded. After removing the wooden cork from the bottle, he poured a small amount of oil into the palm of his hand. I looked at him in a muddle as he rubbed his oiled palms and beckoned again, “Turn around, Nandani.”

I couldn't help but notice how enticing his husky and low voice was. The way my name smoothly tripped off his tongue sounded so pleasing. I gaped at his sturdy expression and turned towards the shelves in a daze.

“Lower the shawl.” I removed the shawl from my body when he added, “Pull down your dupatta, too.” I pulled the dupatta off my head and placed my heavy, damp braid on my shoulder to give him access to my back. “Untie,” He emphasised, and inhaling a sharp breath, I undid the knots of my blouse, loosening it for him. He inched closer and inquired, “Where exactly is it hurting?” I pointed my finger at the lower back and middle back, where I usually tied my skirt and the knot of my blouse.

“Here,” I felt him slowly lather the oil over my back with smooth strokes. He first made slow circular motions in the middle of my back, gliding his hands up with light friction, and softly brought his hands down to my hips. Repeating the same technique a few times, he helped ease the stiffness of my muscles, and I closed my eyes in relaxation.

Applying gentle pressure with his fingertips, he kneaded my back in circular motions. He pressed both thumbs against my back to alleviate tension and

continued massaging in the same manner for a few minutes, providing great relief. He was so careful that, for once, I didn’t feel uncomfortable with his touch.

As he moved away, he took a cotton cloth from the shelf and wiped his hands clean.

“Tie it back. You will get relief in some time,” I turned to look at him, clutching my blouse from behind to tie the strings. However, the interlaced pattern of the strings left me struggling to tighten the blouse on my own.

Seeing me striving, he turned me again towards the shelf and held the strings. I felt his fingers touching mine, keeping the blouse in place, as he started tying it.

“Tighter,” I muttered, and he yanked it too hard, making me gasp for air in suffocation. “Ahh…. A little loose,” I exclaimed, and he loosened it too much. “No, a little tighter,”

He secured it slowly and asked, “Is it right now?” I nodded as he fastened the knot. Adjusting my clothes, I pulled the dupatta over my head again and wrapped it around myself with the shawl.

“Thank you for the massage.” I had to thank him because it indeed helped me with the pain.

“And you will sleep on the bed tonight,” he asserted, looking at me.

Shaking my head, I insisted, “I'll sleep where you'll sleep. Be it on the bed or the floor,”

Glaring at me in frustration, he grumbled, “What if I do not show up tonight? How will you sleep alone on the floor?” I looked at him with hurt and held his hand to stop him from leaving.

“I'll wait for you, Rudra,” I said, “There is no one I know here. Remember, I came here with you, for you,” I left his hand, and he held his gaze with mine in a silent contact.

“You should go back to the chamber. The attendants must be waiting for you,” I nodded, heading toward the door, but then paused midway and turned around.

“There must be something you like,” I inquired. Taking unhurried steps in my direction, he looked into my eyes and muttered,

“There was someone I liked,” I felt a pang in my heart when he referred to me as 'was'.

“Looks like someone is no more,” I said. And he pushed me against the door and grabbed me by my waist, closer to him. “Don't you dare,” his squeezing hold on my waist told me how angry he was.

“Until when are you going to be angry with me? And how long am I supposed to be angry with you?” I questioned, my tone filled with despair.

His gaze softened at my remark, and he muttered indistinctly, “I am not angry.”

“You're not happy either. You didn't have to marry me if you hate me so much,” my voice cracked with emotion, and I looked at the ground. Suddenly, he cupped my cheeks and made me look into his eyes.

“And you didn't have to cooperate with me,” he said. I furrowed my brows, clenching my fists, and immediately tried to push him away.

“Of course, I was getting married to the King, but it was you who came to marry me,” I said, gritting, pointing my finger at him.

“Oh yes, it's all my fault. You're a good little girl,” he exaggerated, keeping his face neutral.

Backing away, he moved to the shelf and took his clothes out while I stood rooted in place, unwilling to explain anything to him. He had to understand, whether it was him or me, that one must overcome one’s old beliefs and seek truth.

I strode out of the servants' quarters and made my way back to the chamber. Suman and the other attendants, standing close by, joined me, and on our way back, Suman asked me, “How did you get wet?” I blinked at her, not knowing how to respond.

Looking at my wet lehenga, I gave her a curt reply, “I slipped on the bathing-area floor.” She looked at me dubiously, but said nothing.

Returning to the chamber, I took off the shawl and went to the bathing room. I quickly bathed and changed into a beautiful orange dress with a matching dupatta. It was lightweight yet elegant, making it perfect for a newlywed bride.

My back pain had tapered off a little.

Once I was ready, I went to the royal kitchen and saw the kitchen staff gathered around the fireplace, with huge, clean containers for cooking.

“What is on the menu, Ranisa?” One of the cooks asked, and I looked towards them.

“Khichdi, less spicy mixed-vegetables, plain daal, roti, and Daliya with a light consistency,” I instructed, “I will cook all of this. And royal cuisine will not be cooked or served until the soldiers are healed. Also, ensure every wounded soldier and guard is served with turmeric milk two times, day and night.” They all looked at each other.

“But, Ranisa, this menu is for the soldiers and servants of the palace. What will the high ranks eat?”

Maintaining my poise, I looked into their eyes and stated in an unwavering tone, “The higher ranks eat what Ranaji eats and Ranaji eats what soldiers eat. So, until Ranaji touched the royal food, this would be served to everyone in the palace.” They nodded in unison, and tucking my dupatta into my skirt, I began cooking food for everyone in the palace.

By the time I was done, it was noon already. I sighed, washing my hands. “Serve the food for the soldiers.”

One of them interrupted and said, “But Ranisa, no one eats before Ranaji eats.” I gave him a slight smile.

“Just do as I say,” he nodded, and they all started transferring the food into smaller containers. I looked at Suman. “Suman, can you please go with the other

attendants and make sure the soldiers are well fed?” She nodded.

“Of course.”

I turned to prepare a plate for Badi Maasa and went to her chamber, carrying the food with the help of the attendees. The announcer made my presence known, and I entered her chamber. I found her resting on the bed, and she opened her eyes to look at me.

“Nandani, you here? Come sit,” she welcomed me with a warm smile, and I took the plate closer to her on the bed.

“I brought you lunch.” I said, placing the plate across her, when she asked me, “You cooked?” I nodded, smiling back at her.

“Come sit,” she patted beside her on the bed, and I sat facing her. She frowned, noticing the food, and questioned, “Khichdi, Daliya and roti?”

I briefly lowered my gaze and replied politely, “You seemed unwell yesterday. Ranaji is wounded too, so I thought simple food would be good for everyone, for the soldiers too.” She smiled and held the bowl in her trembling hands.

“That’s so thoughtful of you. God bless you, my dear,” she started eating, but suddenly paused. “Did Rudra eat yet?” I shook my head.

“No, not yet. He said he would eat once all the soldiers were treated,” she nodded, staring at nothing.

“He's always been like that. You know, whenever he returned from a mission or a war, until each and every soldier was treated, he would neither eat, sleep, nor get his injuries dressed. Sometimes, he would even get in the physicians' hair to see how they were treating the soldiers. As a commander, he always puts forth his soldiers' health. He is uncompromising in that,”

Listening to her intently, I lost my appetite, even though I was hungry after working so hard, because I was overwhelmed by how much he cared for his soldiers. It hurt me deeply to know that for me, he had to raise swords against the people he prioritized in his life.

“Did you eat?” she asked, bringing me out of my reverie, and I responded, “Not yet, Badi Maa.” She finished the daliya and picked up the dal to eat.

“You should eat. Don't worry about him. Oftentimes, we wouldn't even know where he goes, what he does, or what he eats. He loves his solitude too much to let anyone intrude,” she said. I nodded, pursing my lips. “You cook really well.”

I offered her a grateful smile. After she finished, I took the empty plates back and handed them to the attendees. I returned to my chamber. Suman wasn't back yet.

I wanted to meet him, ensure he had eaten, tend to his wounds, but I didn't know where he was. Thinking that lying in bed would do no good, I got up and went to the guards standing outside my chamber.

I had to find him or make him come to me.

“Can you let Ranaji know that I asked for him?” I requested.

“Yes, Ranisa,” he said, and bowed before leaving. On my way back to the bedroom, I asked one of the attendants to bring food, herbal paste, and gauze to dress his wounds. Shortly after, she returned with everything I had requested. I told her to place it on the table.

After a long wait, he traversed into the chamber.

“You called me Ranisa,” he playfully addressed me, sauntering closer. I looked at him, amazed; my breath caught in my throat, yet I managed to nod.

I didn't know why, but after the wedding, every time his eyes captivated mine in intense contact, a swirling sensation sparked in my gut, like tiny birds flapping their wings inside.

He stood before me in a simple, plain maroon kurta, yet I found him attractive. Was it his chiseled features? Or his strong physique? Or the way he looked at me, as if he was stripping away not just my clothes, but my skin, my sanity, with just his eyes?

“Why? Everything alright?”

I found him standing mere inches apart and immediately turned my gaze south. “Have you got your wounds dressed?” I muttered in a low tone, gathering myself to look back at him.

“Not yet,” he answered, and I moved forward with the bit of courage I had and said, “Let me do it.” He receded his steps and looked at the food and medicine on the table.

“I've so much work to do.” He said. He was about to leave, but I held his wrist.

“Rudra, aap lad lijiye humse, jhagad lijiye, bol dijiye jo bolna hai, rulaana hai toh rula bhi dijiye, kintu apna adhikaar toh jataaiye hum par. Hum nahi keh rahein hain ki humse prem kijiye, parantu humein apni patni ke roop mein toh sweekaar kijiye,” (Rudra, fight with me, argue with me, tell me whatever you want to, make me cry even, but at least express your rights on me. I'm not telling you to love me, but please accept me as your wife) I desperately pleaded, my tone quivered, and he turned around to look at me.

“Everyone here addresses you as Ranisa, doesn't that mean you’re my wife?” He remarked, pulling away from my hold. I stepped closer and shook my head.

“No, that doesn't mean I am your wife. I'll not be considered your wife until you treat me like one. Actually, let’s just drop this. Yes, I'm your wife, and yes, they call me Ranisa,” I stated, wiping the tears off my face and adding, “So now take your kurta off and take a seat.” I pointed towards the couch, giving him a stern look.

He stared at me for a few moments; however, he pulled off his kurta and sat on the couch. I picked up the medicine bowl and sat beside him. I closely observed the wound on his upper arm and applied the herbal paste.

“I’m allowing you to do this only because you're worried for me,” He mumbled softly.

I glanced at him once. Bringing my attention to his wound, I remarked, “Oh, thank god, you can see I am worried. It would've been better if you had realised my feelings earlier.” His constant gaze on me made a sudden warmth spread across my face.

“Nandani, can I ask you something?” He asked, and I nodded, “Ji,”

“Will you answer honestly?” I lifted my gaze and blinked at him, nodding again. “You loved me so much, so why did you sleep with him?” I swallowed and went back again to dressing his cuts.

“You loved me, too. So, why did you leave me? Why did you break my heart?” Dodging his question, I retorted in a low tone.

“How do you know I loved you?” He counter-questioned.

Shifting my focus from his upper arm to the wound on his forearm, I stated, “You raised your sword against your soldiers, went against your Badi Maa and battled with the previous king to marry me. I bet it wasn't just for revenge.”

Inhaling a deep breath, he proclaimed, “But, I don't love you.” I narrowed my eyes at him and countered, “So why did you marry me? You should've just let me marry him and have his children.”

He sighed. “We had a history, and I didn’t want you to become my aunt.”

I knelt in front of him on the floor and moved my fingers close to his stomach. “This is it. It means you would've let me marry anyone,”

And he immediately responded, “Of course.” I looked at him, astounded.

Dropping my shoulders, I shook my head and tended to his wound.

I stayed silent after that, neither looking at him nor asking anything. There was no point in talking when he had nothing to offer me.

After applying the paste, I dressed his wounds in cotton gauze, neatly tying its ends.

“Have you eaten?” he asked, breaking the silence. I kept myself busy cleaning my hands and placing the empty bowl on the table.

Ignoring everything around me, I served food for myself and settled on the edge of the bed. I was lost in my meal when I caught sight of him wearing his kurta out of the corner of my eye.

He walked towards the bed and knelt before me. But I kept my eyes fixed on the plate, munching on the food quickly.

My heart was beating so rapidly in anger. So much anger.

He could’ve said that he wouldn't have let me marry not just to the king but any other man, at least just to console me. But, no, this righteous man had to play honest.

Suddenly, he grabbed my spoon and, looking into my eyes, tasted the food. Taking a few more bites, he playfully remarked, “This is a huge empire, little wife. How will you rule it with so much anger right at the tip of your nose?” He

stretched his hand out, moving the spoon closer to my mouth. I blankly stared at him for a couple of moments and took a bite, glaring at him.

“Thank you for cooking for all the soldiers,” He said.

I gobbled all the food and demanded in a low tone, “No thanks. I want a hug, if you don't mind." He waited for a moment, but eventually stood up and asked for my hand.

I held his hand as he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer. The way he hugged me made me close my eyes in comfort. I rested my head on his chest, enveloping my arms around his torso and tightly fisting his kurta. “I would've never forgiven myself if anything had happened to you,” I said, my tone muffled.

He remained silent, gently caressing my head. With his other hand, he tightened his embrace around me, and I discovered my peace. In this hug, all my worries turned to ashes.

As he pulled away from the hug, he gently cupped my cheek and placed a soft peck on my forehead, saying,

“Gatte ki sabzi pasand hai humein,” **(**I like Gatte[37]). I beamed at his late reply, and he took a step back.

“Should I make it for dinner tonight?” I asked in a light tone. He shook his head.

“I'll tell you when to make it, not tonight,” I smiled, and he added, “I’ve already had my lunch with the soldiers. Now I must go back; there’s so much work to do. Rest and don't get angry.” I nodded, and he left the chamber.

My insides rejoiced in happiness.

I knew it; I knew he couldn't see me becoming angry and upset, and I knew that he would never allow me to marry anyone, even though he didn't accept it.

Later, Suman came back and plopped herself on the couch. She looked worn out.

“Did Everyone eat?” I asked, and she nodded, “Yes. I paid attention to each one of them. They liked the food.” I sat on the bed with a contented smile and thanked her. Since she looked so weary, I asked her to take a break and rest for a while.

“Of course,” she leaned back, straightening her legs on the couch, making herself comfortable.

I advanced towards the library and, upon entering, scanned the wooden racks lined with hundreds of books. Taking out a yellow-covered book, I flopped onto a couch to read for a while. I began reading the story, turning the pages one by one and delving deeper into the narrative.

It was about the experiences of a traveller who crossed mountains to find a hidden treasure.

I became so engrossed in the book that I didn't realize how much time had passed. It was when my stomach growled with hunger that I lifted my gaze from the book and noticed that most of the lamps were off. The library was dark all around.

I returned the book to its place and retired to my chamber. I looked around to find any attendants, but no one was present, not even Suman.

“Suman,” I called her, but she didn't answer. I searched for her throughout the chamber, but she was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, my gaze fell on her as she paced toward me. “Where were you?” I asked, and she placed her hands on her knees, bending forward, gasping for air.

“I was searching for you. I got so worried, where did you go?” she asked.

I frowned at her. “I was in the library,” I said.

Standing straight, she smacked her forehead and bit her tongue. “Oh well! I looked everywhere but the library.”

Smiling, I asked, “What time is it? And where's everyone?”

She looked at me, surprised, and replied, “It’s late at night, Nandani. Everyone retired to their chambers. The attendants brought your dinner, but you weren't around. I thought you might have gone to meet Ranaji, so I sent them back.” I gulped as my stomach rumbled more with hunger.

“No, I was in the library,” She pursed her lips.

“Sorry, I didn't know that. Are you hungry? Should I go and get food?” I shook my head.

“It's late already. I don't think it is appropriate for you to wander around. Where is Ranaji, by the way? Did you ask someone?”

She nodded, answering, “I asked about him in the evening. They said he went out of the palace for some work.” I lowered my eyes and furrowed my brows, guessing where he could've gone.

“Do you, by any chance, have an idea where he went?” She shook her head and retorted, “No, and I don't think he will return this late at night.” I nodded and told her to go to bed since it was already past sleep time. She left for her room, and I went to the courtyard.

I was waiting for him, looking at the bright moon in the sky and the trees in the garden swirling with the gentle night breeze. The chirps of the insects in the hushed night were calming yet eerie.

I was frightened, alone in the huge chamber, in the gigantic palace, and above all, I didn’t know where he was or when he'd be back.

Accompanied by the silence, staring at the infinite stars, I lay on the carpeted floor. Because I knew that wherever he would be, he must be sleeping on the floor or maybe awake, doing something.

I didn't know when I fell asleep on an empty stomach.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The sweet noise of birds chirping woke me up, and I sleepily looked at the sky at dawn. I turned around to see if he had come, but the cold carpets said otherwise.

I felt dejected. Clearly, he didn't care about me. This explains why he didn't tell me where he was going. The uncertainty of not knowing where he went or where he was made my heart sink.

How could he do that? I understood that there were many issues that required his full attention, but this was unacceptable. How could he leave me alone in the palace without informing me?

I got up, but suddenly a stabbing pain erupted in my back, forcing me to sit down. Tears brimmed in my eyes, and I couldn't even understand why I was crying. I was hurt and angry, and my back felt damaged.

Wiping my face, I stood up and went to the bathroom. By the time I finished taking a bath, the sun had risen. When I returned to the sleeping chamber, I spotted the attendants arriving to do their daily chores.

However, I sent them all back.

I was annoyed and angry, and whenever I felt this way, I would start working until my mind shifted away from the cause of my fury.

I dusted the entire chamber, cursing him in my mind. Every nook and corner was cleaned. I asked the attendants to bring me additional sets of curtains, pillow covers, couch covers, and bed sheets, which I changed with their help. I even had the carpets and mats replaced.

By the end of the day, I was exhausted, yet my anger still hadn't subsided, and my back pain only worsened.

After washing up in the late evening, I lay on the bed, covering myself with the comforter so I wouldn't yell at anyone.

Tears welled up in my eyes.

He still had not returned. Lying in bed, I sobbed, feeling my energy drain away.

I hate him. I hate him so much. I kept ranting in my mind.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

“R

anaji, his condition is getting worse,” the physician who was aiding all the wounded soldiers informed me. “The cuts are too deep and the infection he has caught from the blade, I'm afraid, has spread to his other body parts,” he added.

After meeting her, I went to see the soldiers. Many of them recovered quickly, while some were in critical condition, and I was genuinely concerned about their well-being.

“Do whatever you can, just save him.”

He shook his head in disappointment and replied, “I am sorry, Ranaji, but his body is not responding to our treatment.” I pursed my lips as I looked at the unconscious soldier lying on the cot.

I had to save him. Until his heart was beating, we had a chance to save him.

The higher-ranking officials of the royal entourage, including the head advisor and the royal physician, had left the kingdom after the battle. The widows of my cousins were in their maternal homes and would return to Suryagarh at any time.

No one knew about what happened here. However, I was certain that as soon as the old king began sending letters to the neighbouring kingdoms to solicit support, our problems would escalate.

Before that, I had to reinstate the royal entourage in its entirety, comprising all the higher officials. I also had to ensure that we had a well-established defence system internally from the soldiers’ side. For this, I considered appointing my younger brother as the head commander of the army.

I lifted that soldier in my arms and asked a guard to bring me my horse to the palace’s main entrance.

Taking him to my Guruji[38] was the only option left. He was one of the best physicians I knew. He would treat even the most critical cases with his analytical abilities and intellect.

Covering him with a cloth, I carried him to the entrance and settled him on my horse's back. I mounted, holding the reins, and immediately rode to my Guruji. I arrived by evening and called for him, standing outside the cottage.

“Guruji,” He came out, opening the door.

“Rudra! What happened? What happened to him?” he looked at me, perplexed. I stepped inside the cottage and laid him on the mat on the floor.

“He is wounded; please treat him.”

“How did he get these wounds?” he asked. I gulped and replied, “In a sword fight.” He removed his bandages and further inquired, “What sword fight?” I sat beside him.

“Bring me that green paste,” he said, and I immediately walked towards his small wooden almirah. Scanning the containers of all medicinal herbs, I asked, “Which one?”

“The one at the top shelf, third bottle,” He directed, keeping his eyes on the soldier, and I fetched the bottle for him. He began cleaning his wounds and asked me, “How are you? You came to meet me after so long,”

I blinked nervously because I didn't know how to tell him about everything I did. My conscience wouldn't allow me to hide or lie.

“Guruji, I have something to tell you,” he nodded, telling me to go on while he focused on the wounds. I braced myself and finally revealed the truth, “I attacked Suryagarh.”

He looked at me, astonished. “What??”

I nodded and went on, “Yes, I had to... I mean, I fought a battle against my soldiers,”

He gave me a fierce look. “Are you out of your mind, Rudra?”

He turned his gaze back to the soldier, and I apologised, “I am sorry, Guruji, but it was a circumstantial demand that I had to do it,” I tried to justify my point.

“This is not how you become a king,” he seethed menacingly, “Becoming a king is not just about ruling over people. Kings are the servants of their subjects. They serve people, not slaughter them,” I gulped, dropping my eyes and nodding.

“I know, Guruji, but I had no other option. I made a terrible mistake and to rectify it, I had to…. it was necessary,” I explained.

“What mistake?” he asked without looking at me. His attention was entirely on treating the soldier.

I then told him everything from the very beginning. I left nothing out: all my plans, how I tricked Nandani, how my feelings changed for her, what she did, and what I did in return. It was past midnight by the time I finished. He kept treating the soldier and waiting to see if his system responded to the medicine.

He looked furious at what I did.

“You shouldn't have involved an innocent woman in this. Never. Women are not objects; they are to be respected. How could you treat her like that? And on top of that, you married her forcibly,” he exclaimed, and I instantly retorted, “No, not forcibly, she too wanted to marry me.”

He snapped at me angrily, “Do you not know that you’re forbidden from getting close to any woman until your coronation? You worked hard for this, to earn it the right way.” I looked down in remorse, realizing I never wanted this to happen.

“I know Guruji, and I'm deeply regretful. But I didn't lose control over myself, so please guide me on the right path. And now, I am a husband, and I like her. Maybe I have even deeper feelings for her, but….” I paused, taking a deep breath. “... but every time I see her, I remember the king slept with her. Moreover, I have additional responsibilities. She is my family; hence, how can I maintain control

after getting married? It’s as if I worked so hard pushing an ice block for so long, but it melted away, leaving me with nothing. I cannot hate her, I cannot love her. I can’t be close to her and cannot stay away from her,” I finished, frustrated, raking my fingers through my hair.

He stared at me silently for a few moments.

“Rudra, you’re so close to achieving your goal. You cannot lose control now,” he said, “You've put so much effort into controlling your emotions. You lived like a normal man, built your strength like a true king, and worked hard to compete with them. No one can beat you with the knowledge, skills, and power you possess. But you have made a terrible mistake; you’ve made enemies. A king does welfare for the people. The people are not for the king; a king is for the people,” he expressed, pointing his fingers at me.

“And about your wife, you've got to tell her that you cannot fulfil all your responsibilities towards her. You'll have to continue your semen retention until the Yagya. If you lose control, it will be difficult for you to gain it all again. And trusting your wife or not is your matter. If you feel that her sleeping with someone else before marriage is a big deal, then you can make a big issue out of it. But if you think what she has done is not wrong, then you can simply live with it, moving on,” I nodded at his rationalisation.

We kept talking till the sun rose, and he blessed me to win people’s hearts. He advised me to do good for them. I was waiting for the soldier to gain consciousness so that I could take him back to the palace.

She must’ve been waiting for me. I didn't know, but I always had a soft corner for her. She was a princess, nine years younger than me, and somewhere she became precious to me. Like, she was mine to care, to scold, to laugh with, to make angry.

I was beginning to enjoy being in her presence. It wasn't irritating, but content. As her husband, I wanted to be responsible for her.

It was noon already, but the soldier hadn't opened his eyes. And so I kept waiting. Guruji offered me lunch, but I refused.

I wasn't sure if she would’ve eaten anything. Somewhere, my instincts were telling me she must be angry with me, torturing herself.

Finally, the soldier opened his eyes, and I asked him if he could travel. When he agreed, I brought him back after bidding adieu to Guruji.

It was late in the evening by the time we reached.

My clothes were stained with blood, so I took a quick bath first. Changing into fresh clothes, I asked the physician to dress my wounds, as I didn't want her to worry about my injuries being left open.

Once I had them dressed, I left for our chamber, and the moment I stepped inside, everything looked… different.

The chamber’s furnishings had been changed—it smelled pleasant inside, and seemed cleaner. My sight fell on an attendee passing through. Stopping her, I asked, “Where is Ranisa?”

Keeping her head low, she answered, “Ranaji, Ranisa is sleeping in her bedroom. She got tired after cleaning,”

I furrowed my brows. “After cleaning?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Yes, Ranaji, she woke up early in the morning and cleaned every corner of the chamber on her own. She even had the carpets and mats changed. When I asked her if she wanted anything for her back pain, she refused. She has eaten nothing since last night,” I took a deep breath, looking around.

She cleaned everything in anger?

I shook my head and asked her, “Can you bring our dinner to the courtyard?” She nodded and left. I entered the bedroom and found her sleeping on the bed, covered with the comforter. I called her.

“Nandani,” I walked further inside, but she did not answer. “Nandani,” I called her again, but she kept silent.

Moving closer to the bed, I sat beside her and pulled the comforter, but she pulled it back. “Aeeeee,” I made a playful sound and called out again, “Nandani.” I tried to hold her wrist, but she jerked my hand away. “Nandani,” I called again and muttered, “I had some work.”

“So go, do your work,” she replied, “Go away, never come back. Just be gone,” her voice turned hoarse and broke by the end.

I again tried to pull the comforter down and said, “Nandani, so much anger, you cleaned the whole chamber!” For some reason, I found it endearing that she cleaned everything in a fit of anger. I couldn't stop laughing.

I again tried to get hold of her hand, but she yanked it away.

This was it. I got off the bed and opened all the curtains so no one could see I was lying with my wife. I climbed over the bed beside her.

“Hey, look at me,” I held her arm, shifting closer, but she moved away. I tried to turn her towards me, but she resisted so much.

“Don't touch me,” she said, a little loud. I clasped her wrist to turn her to face me. But she had her back facing me.

I held her chin, freeing her wrist, but she again prevented my touch. Having no other option, I hovered on top of her and clasped both her wrists, pinning them above her head.

I cupped her cheek to make her look at me. My eyes met with her red, swollen eyes.

“I am sorry,” I softly muttered, but she tried to get rid of my hold. I leaned in, moving my face close to hers.

“Leave me, stay away from me. Go to hell,” she spat in absolute annoyance, wiggling under me.

I placed my forehead on her and mumbled, “Nandani, I am sorry.”

Inhaling a sharp breath, she turned her face away, panting, her heart beating fast. She kept trying to free her wrists.

“I’m sorry,” I clutched her wrists tighter, and suddenly a few of her bangles broke, making me immediately leave her hands.

She placed her little hands on my chest and tried to push me away, but my eyes were busy staring at her red, plump lips. “Stay away,” she tried to force me away again.

I noticed she was wearing a beautiful yellow dress.

“Nandani, hey, look at me,” I said, staying in the same position, and gently holding her wrist. I removed each of her bangles one by one.

She calmed down a little in the meantime and exclaimed, “I hate you, Rudra!”

I focused on removing her bangles. “Stop, please, these are wedding bangles. I shouldn't take them off until forty-five days of our marriage,” Her voice turned a little soft, but she persistently kept pushing me with her other hand.

“And, I don't want to break them either before forty days,” I removed all the bangles and took off her rings too, doing the same with her other hand. Her henna began to fade with all the work she did.

She looked at me, shaking her head. “Rudra, please, no,”

I looked into her eyes. “I have all the rights, Ranisa. To take off your bangles, every piece of your jewellery, your clothes, everything that covers you and I have more rights too.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I blushed profusely at his words and snatched my hands away from his hold.

“Apne adhikaaroan ka gyaan hai, aapke kartavyoan ka kya?” (You know just of your rights, what about your duties?) I mumbled, getting off the bed, but he clasped my dupatta. I tried to walk off his clutch, but he held the strings of my blouse.

Not giving up, I tried once more to move away from him, but he seized my wrist and drew me closer to him on the bed.

Seizing me by my waist, he lay me under him, and mouthed, “You want to fight? Come on, let’s fight,” I gave him an angry look.

How could he provoke me?

First, he was out all night without telling me, and now he was trying to make it up to me. He couldn’t just leave and then return, expecting that I would forgive him.

“I don't want to fight, I don't want to talk, I don't want to see your face. Just go away like you did last night,” I gritted, emphasizing every word, and tried to distance myself from him, but he held my wrist, twisting my hand behind my back.

We were mere inches away, and I noticed his eyes falling on my lips. My breathing suddenly turned heavier as he leaned closer.

“No,” I turned my face to the other side, and his face dropped onto my neck.

His breath fanning over my ear made me blink nervously when he murmured, “You're hot when you're angry.” I tried facing him, but he pressed his lips on the skin below my ear.

“Rudra, stop. Go away. How dare you leave the palace without informing me? You could've just told me. I got so worried for you,” my voice turned to a faint whisper by the end, his lips melting into me.

Moving his face away, he slowly muttered, “I’m sorry, Nandani. But it was an emergency,” he said, freeing my hand, and I held his kurta.

“Hum aapse din ka nahi pooch rahe, kintu humein ye baat katai sweekaarya nahi ki aap apni raatein humse door, kahin aur vyateet karein. Aapki raatoan par keval humaara adhikaar hai,” (I’m not asking for your days, but I cannot accept the fact that you'll spend your nights away from me, somewhere else. Only I have the right on your nights), I stated in a firm voice.

His face became serious, and he asked, “Why haven't you eaten?”

“I was angry,” I gulped and muttered in a low tone, looking away. “I’m still angry,” I instantly added, widening my eyes at him. He smiled at my remark, sliding his arm around my waist and pulling me closer.

“I’m sorry,” he said. I tried to free myself, but he kept me detained, tightening his hold over me, and made me look at him. “A soldier needed aid. I had to take him to my Guruji. He is one of the best physicians,” He reasoned. My gaze softened, and all my anger melted away, calming my mind.

“How is he now?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Letting out a sigh, he shifted a little to my side, weighing on his elbows and replied, “Critical. He has a one-year-old boy and his wife passed away six months ago,” he spoke with a heavy heart, “I'm worried for him, he is a friend to me,” His voice sounded rough and tired.

Inhaling a deep breath, he gently and slowly raised my chin with his fingers so I could meet his eyes. He slowly removed my nose ring and drawled in a low tone, “Kiss me.”

I immediately tried to shove him away, but he held my wrist and twisted my arm behind my back again.

“Kiss me, Nandani. I'm in a terrible mood,” He growled under his breath, placing his forehead on mine, closing his eyes.

My heart pulse quickened as he intertwined our fingers behind my back in a tight grip. “You know, I hate you,” I forced out.

“I hate you, too,” He breathed right above my lips.

“Rudra, I’m angry and you shouldn't do it when I'm angry.” He sucked in a sharp breath.

“So don't be angry. Because when you get angry, you look hot, and when you look hot, I want to kiss you and make you feel even hotter. And, if you feel hotter, no one will calm you. So, don't get angry, yeah?” he stated.

My lashes felt heavier with the proximity. I could feel his breath tickling my lips.

He gradually bent towards me with his parted lips and brushed them over mine tenderly. My eyes shut close, and my back arched in anticipation, making me dip my head into the soft mattress.

His lips moved over mine, causing an instant spike in my heartbeat, and hair raised on every inch of my skin.

The softness of his lips passed a fervent heat to my body, making my cheeks burn hot. Tightening his hold on my wrist, he pushed himself closer to me, but pulled his face back slowly.

Heaving terribly, I looked at his wet lips and found his eyes still set on mine.

“Rudra, don't play with me,” I grumbled.

Bringing his gaze to my eyes, he muttered in a deep tone, “I’m angry, you’re angry, so come on, show me how angry you can be.” He crashed his lips onto mine in a flash, leaving my wrist.

I couldn't suppress the moan erupting from the back of my throat when he placed his palm on my exposed back to pull me closer in his hold.

He gently sucked my lower lip between his lips, sending the warmth of his mouth coursing through every inch of my body. I closed my eyes and held onto his arms as I felt a lack of air with his lips locked on mine.

His sucking on my lips intensified fervor as his teeth nipped at my lower lip. The intensity of the kiss made me pull my knees high, causing my anklets to jingle, and I moaned over his lips.

“Ahh…” I pressed my thighs together as I felt my core throb with the heat.

Seizing my hair, he angled my head from behind to get better access to my lips. I felt the flapping of a thousand butterflies in my stomach as the kiss became harsher.

He grasped my blouse from behind, making it tighter for me to even breathe. My nipples perked up, feeling the roughness of his palm against my back. His hand was so big that it froze me under him.

“Ranaji,” suddenly, an attendee's voice startled me, making me withdraw.

He immediately detached his lips from mine and looked at me. His expression shifted, as if he were suddenly alert, and he straightened up.

“Yes,” He regarded.

“Ranaji, a soldier outside has come to meet you. He says, Mohan has passed away,” the attendee informed him, and I looked at his aghast expression.

“No,” He immediately stepped down the bed, parted the curtains, and scurried out. Taking my dupatta, I covered my head and ran past the attendee behind him.

We both rushed to the spot where the deceased soldier lay. The area reverberated with the cries of a baby in an attendee's arms.

“Mohan,” Rudra dropped to his knees beside his body and shook him.

“Mohan, get up. You've got to stay alive for your son.” I heard his voice waver for the first time since I knew him. I saw him breaking in front of me. Tears fell from his eyes as he looked at the baby, crying loudly.

Tears collected in my eyes too, seeing the whole scene, and I walked towards the baby to try to console him.

“Someone has to take responsibility for his child,” Rudra said, and I looked at everyone, their heads bowed down. No one answered.

The baby looked at me with his red nose, and I asked the attendee in a low voice, stroking the baby’s cheek, “Has he eaten anything?”

The attendee instantly answered, “Ranisa, I don't know. His father used to take care of him.” A tear fell from my eyes, and I took the baby in my hands, patting his back. He started crying louder, and I told the attendee to bring food for the baby.

I turned to look at Rudra, who was watching me holding the baby and looking at the dead soldier again. I could guess what he was referring to earlier.

“I think you should take the baby away. He is crying more, looking at his father,” He said, and I nodded.

I brought the baby to our chamber and walked back and forth in the courtyard, rocking him in my arms, to calm him down. But he didn't stop crying at all.

Finally, the attendee arrived with a plate filled with milk and food in her hand. Holding the baby in my arms, I sat on the carpet while Suman joined us. I fed him milk with a spoon and some food, which he accepted, but he kept crying.

“Oh, little one, please calm down,” I sang softly, rubbing his chest to distract him. Holding him against my chest, I gently patted his back to help him burp. I softly touched his head.

“My child, I am here, I'm right here, baby,” I spoke to him sweetly, soothing his back, comforting him with my warmth. He calmed down a little, gripping my dupatta in his tiny hands.

He was such a cute boy with curly hair. I washed off his tears and stood up to walk around. It was dark by the time Ranaji came back. He came closer, finding the baby in my hands.

Lying on the floor, he rested his head on the pillow and uttered, “I have to think about the baby. Someone has to take the responsibility.” I went near him and sat down as the baby had fallen asleep.

“Ranaji, I'm ready to take this responsibility,” I said. “I want to adopt him.” he looked at me, stunned.

“But, Nandani, you're so young. How will you care for a baby when you have responsibilities for the whole kingdom?” I shook my head and placed the baby carefully on my lap.

“I will fulfil all my responsibilities like I would've done if I had my baby.” He took a deep breath and touched the baby on his cheek with his finger.

“Are you sure?” he asked, and I nodded. He smiled weakly as an attendee arrived with food and plated it before us.

“You have not eaten yet?” I asked, astonished. He shook his head, shifting closer to me.

“How can I eat when my little wife is starving and cleaning our home?” I bit my lip to restrain my smile.

He brought the plate closer to him and fed me the food. I ate in silence.

“You're not angry now?” He questioned, and I shook my head in disagreement.

“But, please, if you ever have an emergency in the future, inform me in advance,” I emphasised, and he nodded.

Suddenly, the baby started crying again, and I tried to console him.

“Here,” I looked at him, quickly washing his hands in a vessel and drying them with the corner of my dupatta.

He took the baby from my lap and said, “You should eat.” He held him close to his chest and patted his back lightly.

I was surprised at how fast the baby stopped crying in his hands.

“Hey, Hridhaan,” he called to him, and I asked, amazed, “His name is Hridhaan?” He nodded, and the baby immediately slept in his arms.

I smiled, looking at the sight in front of me, and fed him a few bites.

Once we were done eating, I asked an attendee to take the plates back. While washing my hands, I beckoned, glancing at him, “Should I bring the comforters here?” He nodded.

I didn't ask why he wasn't even trying to change. I wanted him to take some time for himself. I couldn't change myself for him in a day; therefore, I wouldn't expect him to change for me so soon either.

Going inside, I returned to the courtyard with the comforters and an extra mattress. He moved aside, allowing me to lay the mattress on the floor and place the comforters. He settled himself and placed the baby on the mattress.

Moving towards the pillars, I pulled all the curtains low so the baby would not catch a cold.

Coming back, I sat down and took off my earrings. I felt his eyes on me, watching my every move, while patting Hridhaan’s chest with his elbow resting on a bolster pillow.

I kept my earrings aside and removed my anklets so the noise wouldn’t disturb the baby's sleep.

After keeping them near my earrings, I lay between him and Hridhaan, facing the baby and covering him with the comforter.

He looked so adorable and calm while sleeping.

Suddenly, he shifted closer to me, holding me from behind.

He moved his arm beneath my head so I could rest. The warmth from his chest comforted my body, and I kept my hand on the baby’s chest and over the comforter. With his other hand, he held mine atop the comforter and kissed my temple from behind.

“You'll make a great queen,” He slowly whispered, and I smiled, turning my face sideways to look at him.

“Aapke kaaran humaare poore shareer me peeda hai,” (My whole body is in pain because of you), I complained in a low tone.

Shifting closer to my ear, he muttered in a very slow yet dangerous voice, ***“Aap kahein toh ek maheene ke liye aapka bistar se neeche utarna dushkar kardein,”*** (If you say so, I'll make it difficult for you to get off the bed for a month). He teased. My stomach somersaulted at his words, and my cheeks heated up instantly.

“Ranaji, don't try to seduce me,” I warned playfully, and he shifted even closer, enveloping me in his arms, connecting my feet with his.

“Ranisa, do I even have to try?” He mimicked my tone, playing with our entwined fingers. And just like that, I fell asleep while talking.

I woke up early in the morning and spotted him beside me, patting the baby, lying on his chest.

“Was he crying?” I rasped in my sleepy tone, and he turned his face to look at me.

“Yeah, he woke up probably because he wet the bed, but I've changed his lower,” He said, and I touched the mattress beside me, it was damp.

I raised myself and saw the baby resting peacefully over him. Tying my hair in a bun, I pulled my dupatta from under his knee.

“You get ready first, I'll take care of him until then,” He suggested. I nodded and picked up my wedding bangles in the first place to wear, as I didn't want to fall prey to any bad omen.

I then retired to our bedroom, took a quick bath, and changed into a red and green lehenga. I returned to see him tossing Hridhaan up in the air, causing him to laugh heartily.

“Hahahah…” The sound of the baby’s giggles filled the air.

Smiling at the pleasing view, I went near them. His sight fell on me as I sat beside him and grabbed my earrings and anklet bells.

He put the baby down and said, “Wait.” He stood up and left. Hridhaan crawled behind, trying to catch him, but I picked him up.

“Hridhaan, my boy, you want milk?” I spoke sweetly to him and he cooed enthusiastically.

Rudra returned with a bowl in his hand and sat down in front of me. He said, “Turn around.” I stared at the oil in the bowl and at his face, not believing he would give me a massage again.

I turned my back to him, and he moved closer behind me, sliding my dupatta aside to access my back. I lowered my gaze in timidness when he pulled open the strings of my blouse. I placed my hand over my chest to keep the blouse in place.

“Is it hurting in the same place?” He asked, and I nodded. “Yes,” I heard him say, as he rubbed his palms together with the oil.

“Bend forward,” I gulped and asked nervously, “Forward?”

“Yes,” he added softly, lightly pushing me ahead and placing his palm on my back. The warmth of the oil made me close my eyes as he poured it into the middle of my back.

Moving his fingers in a circular motion, he applied the oil all over my back. I moaned when he put a little pressure while massaging my back in the same motion for some time.

“Does it feel good?” He asked.

“Ahh… yes,” I replied distractedly, lost in the sensation of his hands working wonders on my sore back.

He then glided his hands up to my nape from my lower back. Massaging my shoulders in a circle a few times, he moved his hands to my nape and gently kneaded the muscle, which had my heart racing.

Again, he slid his hands down, rubbing the side of my waist with a stronger pressure to ease all the tension in my muscles. I felt his long fingers accidentally grazing the side of my breasts while massaging the middle of my back.

“Are you relieved now?” He asked, and I nodded, sitting up straight.

Suddenly, Hridhaan laughed, looking in our direction, and he chuckled, asking him, “You think Maa[39] is beautiful?” Hridhaan chortled even louder, and I smiled at how he addressed me as Hridhaan’s Maa.

Tying my strings back, he rubbed his oiled hands over mine, greasing them.

I looked at Hridhaan, playing with his toes.

“I'll go and get freshened up.” Having said this, he went away. I played peekaboo with Hridhaan for a while and put on my jewelry.

“Nandani,” Suman walked in with some attendants and began parting all the curtains.

Suman sat across from me and looked at Hridhaan. “Oh, baby boy is awake,”

He gave her a toothy laugh, and I said, “He was crying so much last night, but when Ranaji held him, he calmed down. Maybe he found the comfort of his father in Ranaji’s arms,” She nodded absently.

“But, Nandani, don't you think caring for an infant will be too much for your newly built relationship?” I smiled and looked at Hridhaan, gaping at me with his big doe eyes, while playing with my dupatta.

“I know, but he lost his father because of us. He was fighting on Ranaji's side and was martyred. This is the least we can do for him,” I said, caressing his head. “Moreover, he was his friend, and I sensed he wanted to adopt the baby but just couldn't say it, thinking of me. So, I made this easy for him.”

She smiled, saying. “Don't worry, I'll help you take care of him.”

I nodded and took Hridhaan to the bedroom to let the attendees clean the courtyard.

I fed him breakfast, later in the morning, right after which he pooed in his dress.

“Bad Boy,” I ruffled his hair and asked an attendee to bring warm water and a cotton cloth to clean him.

Once done, I changed his clothes and put him to bed. But the little devil wasn't ready to sleep, so I left him with Suman to play and trotted to the courtyard.

I saw the attendees dusting the rugs and asked one of them, “Where is Ranaji?” She turned to look at me and answered, “He is in the bathing room, Ranisa.”

I make my way to the bathing room with the medicinal paste and a cotton gauze in my hands.

As I stepped into the bathing room, I found him taking a bath, sitting on a brass stool. The sound of him pouring water and the tinkling of my anklets blended into a sweet melody that resonated in the large, quiet room.

My sight fell on the cuts on his back, healing slowly. I raked my eyes at his shoulders—they were wide and broad, and his arms seemed thicker and muscly

than my waist.

Sometimes, I wonder how small I appear next to him. His height, physique, and strength—his palm was so large it could cover my face.

I stood there, gawking shamelessly at him as he took a bath. He stood up and covered himself with a white cotton cloth. Turning around, he looked at me, patting himself dry with the cloth and sauntering in my direction.

"Lagta hai ki praatahkaal mein Ranisa ke paas karne ke liye koi kaarya nahi hai," (Seems like Her Majesty has no work to do this morning). That little drop of water trailing down his sharp jawline and dropping on his bare chest via his chin put me in a daze.

I looked away and took a breath to get myself together.

"Hai na! Apne Patidev ki chot par lep lagana, yahi humaara pratham kaarya hai," (I do! To apply medicinal paste on my husband's wounds, this is my primary job), I replied in a teasing tone, biting on my lower lip.

He smiled, shaking his head, and ambled towards the dressing room, and I followed suit. Taking out a fresh pair of his clothes from the almirah, he placed them on the settee and settled himself on the couch. He moved his head, gesturing for me to get nearer.

I went up to and sat beside him. Collecting the paste through my fingers, I started applying it to his affected areas.

"Is your back better now?" He asked in a soft voice, and I nodded in reply.

I moved my head a couple of times to push aside a strand of my hair that hung loosely over my face, to keep it from getting in my way while dressing his wounds.

He brought his hand close to my face and swept the lock away. I bit the inside of my cheek to restrain myself from smiling and focused on treating his injuries when he asked in an amused tone, "Nandani, who cleans when they're angry?" I raised my gaze, and just by looking at him, I could tell that he was controlling himself from bursting into a fit of laughter.

"I do," I stated, and he immediately remarked, "You should be angry at least once a week." I glared at him playfully, and a light chuckle left my lips.

"And you should never get angry," I said, referring to his wounds and what he did in his rage.

"It wasn't anger, it was you," He weighed in, and I furrowed my brows at him.

"Me? You definitely didn't care about me. If you did, you wouldn't have left me after what you did to me," I commented in an undaunted tone, and he took a sharp breath.

"Seems like I have to hear this until my last breath," he said.

I was very much pleased with his reaction. Kneeling low in front of him, I applied the paste to his abdomen. His eyes, all the while, were set on me.

"Rudra, can I ask you something?" I questioned, applying the paste to his chest. He hummed slowly, "Hnnn-hmmm," tucking my hair behind my ear. I kept my

eyes low on his chest and asked in a low tone, “You never loved me?”

I saw his chest heaving up and down as he breathed. The silence followed for moments until he answered in a subdued tone, “I don't know, Nandani. It's not that easy,”

I swallowed, pushing further, “What is not easy?”

“To love someone,” He responded, and I kept the bowl aside. My heart beat raised as I held his wrist and looked at the mark of my name on his forearm, slowly fading away.

Bringing his wrist closer, I caressed the mark with my lip, and he sucked in a deep breath.

“Why can it not be mutual, Rudra?” I asked, tears welling up in my eyes, and when I added weakly, ***“Kab tak tadpenge hum aapke liye… kab samaapt hoga ye. Aur kitni pareekshayein lenge aap humaari, Rudra? Aapse prem karke humse koi apraadh ho gaya hai kya?”*** (How long do I have to yearn for you... When will this end and how many tests are left yet, Rudra? Have I committed a crime by loving you?)

His gaze softened, and he cupped my neck from behind. His touch on my skin, grazing the side of my cheek, made me blink my eyes rapidly. I leaned in, giving in to the warmth of his hold.

“Akeli nahi tadap rahi hain aap,” (You're not the only one suffering). I got on my knees and looked into his eyes.

“Toh humaare madhya ye doori kyun? Kya ab aapke layak nahi rahe hum?” (So why this distance? Am I no longer worthy of you?) He leaned his face closer to mine, staring intensely into my eyes, and shook his head lightly.

“You were, you are, and you will always be worthy of me. You are my pride, my power, my strength, and so much more, I cannot explain,” I gulped a hard lump down my throat, and a lone tear slipped from my eyes.

“Phir ye pran kyun ki aap humaare kabhi nahi honge. Poore jag ki chinta hai aapko, humaari nahi?” (Then why this promise, that you'll never be mine? You worry about the whole world, but not me?)

He sat up straight, groaning softly and muttered in a low tone, ***“Jaisa aap soch rahi hain waisa nahi hai, Nandani,”*** (It is not what you think, Nandani)

My lips wobbled, and a sob left my mouth when I commented, ***“Or jis bhaavna ka hum anubhav kar rahe hain, keh dijiye waisa bhi nahi hai,”*** (And, what about the feelings I have, tell me, even they aren't true)

Inclining towards me, he placed his forehead against mine and mumbled under his breath, “Right now, I cannot give you what you want.”

Tears streamed down my closed eyes, and I whispered, “Okay,” I stood to take my steps away from him and said, “Maybe, for you men, this material, untouched body is the sign of purity,” But he yanked me closer by my wrist, making me sit on his lap.

Clinging to his arm around my waist, he wrapped my neck from behind with his other hand with an urge and possessiveness. My lashes forced closed in fear with the sudden change in his mood.

“It might be a sign of purity for others, not me. For me, you were, you are, and you will always be mine until I’m in your heart. But…” He dragged. His breath fanned over my lips, battling with mine, and he crept closer, tightening his grip around my neck, making me part my lips. ***“Rusht hone ka adhikaar toh hai na humein, jaise aapko tha,”*** (Do I not have the right to be angry, like you did?)

I held his hand on my waist, and my gaze moved back and forth between his eyes and his lips, which were precariously close to mine.

“Kaise manayein hum aapko?” (How do I convince you?) There was an underlying fear in my tone. My cold fingers trembled in nervousness as he caressed my lower lip with his thumb pad.

“Samay toh dijiye humein, Nandani. Ye sab humaare liye sookhe rann mein baadh aane jaisa hai. Isme humein sambhalne to dijiye. Aap hi ke to hain hum. Ek baar bhool karke aabhaas ho gaya hai humein ki aap humaare liye kitni vishesh hain. Aaveg mein aakar ab hum aapko aur kasht nahi dena chaahte,” (At least, give me some time, Nandani. It's like I'm flooded with things I never thought I would get. Let me get used to this. I'm yours after all. One terrible mistake made me realise how important you are to me. I don't want to cause you pain by rushing things now.)

It seemed as if he was casting a spell on me, using words in his breathy voice, which worked wonders. He blinked his eyes weakly, as if heavy emotions pressed upon his lashes. I couldn't say anything anymore. Every time I got close to him, it felt like I didn't have the sanity left to speak or make sense. I would be at a loss for words, and somehow he knew it.

“You have not kissed me yet,” He reminded me, and I tried to cover the tremors in my tone behind the braced confidence.

“I will not, until you let me do everything I want to do.” His hold tightened on my neck, and he brought my face closer to his, crashing me against his hard chest.

“Be a good little wife and kiss me, Nandani.” My breath became erratic at his demand.

Every time he called me 'little wife', I'd feel something coil in the pit of my stomach, sending jolts of current through my spine.

“On one condition,” I said, and he crushed my waist hard, making my breath hitch.

“Ah… Rudra,” a throaty moan slipped from my mouth as his fingers felt cold on my exposed skin.

“What is it?” He asked.

“You'll let me…” Breathing heavily, I added, “...kiss you on your jaw,”

“Just kiss?” He asked huskily, his eyes lingered on my lips.

I narrowed the distance between our faces and saw him closing his eyes. Parting my lips, I slowly landed them on his.

He wanted me to lead the kiss, yet his clasp on my waist and hold on my neck told me who was in control.

I shut my eyes, feeling the undeniable heat building between us, slowly luring us into its spark. I pressed my lips to his in a gentle peck.

We, breathing in each other's air, the cold touch of his soft lips over mine, like his magical, magnetic force, was pulling me. It all felt so sensual, I could feel the moistness erupting down there, which made me press my thighs.

"I'm aroused…." I whispered over his mouth, my breathing uneven. "For you," and as soon as that, he crashed his lips onto mine in a fiery kiss, eagerly moving his tongue along my lips.

My heart raced with the sudden shift in pace. "Please touch me, Rudra," I moved slightly away and purred over his mouth. He tightened his grip on my neck, earning a loud moan from me. "Ahhhhh…."

Drawing my face closer to him, he sucked on my lips passionately, intensely, teasing me with slow and steady tugs, making my stomach roll over.

Pulling away, he looked into my eyes and rubbed up my swollen lips with his thumb and said, "Like a good girl, show me how you touch yourself."

He was such a sly monster. The game I thought I was playing was actually led by him and won. He wasn't being seduced by me; he was seducing me.

His demanding tone stirred my insides, and I blinked rapidly, because our conversation left me feeling hot and timid.

“I don’t touch myself; I never did,” My voice came out airy for the way I was quivering in his hold.

He placed his lips on my cheek, letting them linger there. Moving closer to my ear, he muttered, “Wait for me tonight.” As he moved back, he looked into my eyes and added, “I want to see how you want me to touch you. I’m terrible at it. So you’ll teach me, right, my little seductress?” I shut my eyes, deeply affected by his deep voice.

“Ranaji,” I shivered and abruptly got up from his lap, hearing an attendee's voice. But he yanked me back onto his lap and asked the attendee, “Yes.” His eyes, not leaving mine, made my heart pound insanely, getting over his wild words he just said.

“Ranaji, Lady Chandramukhi is waiting to meet you,” she informed him, and his face distorted.

“Maasimaa[40]?” he mumbled under his breath, squinting his brows. “Alright, I'm coming,” he told her, looking at me. He was about to get me off his lap, but before he could, I held his face and leaned into his neck.

Inhaling a sharp breath, I whispered, “You promised me you'd let me kiss you on your jaw,” I reminded him and pressed my lips under his jaw.

Sensing no disapproval, I drifted my lips to his neck and deepened the kiss.

“Nandani,” He groaned my name, wrapping my nape, but I deepened the pressure of my lips and bit on his skin, not caring if his finger would choke me to death.

Moving my face back, I looked at a fresh bruise about to darken on his skin to a bright red shade. I gently pecked him there and looked at him.

“You really think I would've left you so easily had you left a mark on me?” I smiled and stood up from his lap. He dashed toward the mirror and checked his neck in the reflection.

“I hate you, Nandani,” He said, looking at me through the mirror. I smirked and said, “I hate you, too, Ranaji.” He tried to rub his neck, as if doing so would manage to vanish the mark, making me snort.

“You little creature, I'll see you tonight,” He said, turning around, and I stuck my tongue out.

He went behind the room divider to put on fresh clothes. I saw him running his fingers through his hair as he walked out after getting dressed.

“You should join me to meet Maasimaa. She is like my mother,” He said, and I remembered what my mother told me about Chandramukhi and how she tried to trick my father into breaking their marriage.

“Sure,” I nodded and joined him in the guest chamber of the main palace.

I found her sitting on the couch. Tied into a braid, her lengthy hair rested neatly at her side.

“Maasimaa,” Rudra called, lurching near her.

“Rudra,” she stood up, calling him back. There was something in her voice that didn't sit well with me. It gave me bad vibes. I couldn't understand what my father saw in her.

He bent forward to touch her feet, and she gently placed her hand on his head.

Ewww. Just seeing her touching my husband filled me with disgust.

She turned her eyes in my direction. “Who is she?” Parading, I joined my palms in front of her.

“Pranaam, Maasiji. I’m Nandani,” she blinked at me as if waiting for me to touch her feet. Under no circumstances would I have bowed in front of someone like her.

“Maasimaa, she is Nandani, my wife,” Rudra answered, and she looked at him, furrowing her brows. “Wife?” she gaped at him, and he nodded.

“Yes, I'm sorry, but our wedding happened under compromising circumstances,” She smiled and looked at me.

“Nandani, who?” she asked, scanning my face.

“Nandani, Princess of Mahabaleshgarh, Daughter of Rajvardhan and Abhishree Mahabalesh and now Queen of Suryagarh,” I said with a wide smile, and she turned her gaze down, as if trying to recall something from her memories.

And the moment she did, her face turned pale and her eyes widened. “She is our enemy, Rudra.” She wobbled in a higher pitch, pointing her finger at me. “Do you not remember what her parents did to your father?” She said, looking at him, and I glowered at her.

“Maasiji, you seem to know so much about my parents. How? Where were you when Rudra's father died?” I retorted.

“Nandani,” he suddenly warned me in an authoritative tone and gulped my anger down to calm myself. “Watch your words,” I lowered my gaze.

“Kshama kijiyega Ranaji, kintu jis prakaar aap apne mata-pita ke viruddh kuch anuchit nahi sun sakte, usi prakaar hum bhi apne mata-pita ke viruddh kuch nahi sun sakte,” (I apologise, Ranaji, but just as you cannot hear anything against your parents, I too cannot bear to hear anything against my parents.) I said, and he looked at her.

“Maasimaa, she isn't our enemy; her parents are.” Her face changed at the very moment, as if she were taken aback by what he had just said. “It must have been a long journey; you should rest,” He said, and she nodded distractedly.

“Of course, but I'd like to talk to you later,” He nodded, and she left from there.

He looked at me and, arching his brow, gestured at what had just happened.

“She was my father's mistress. She tried to break their marriage.” I glared at the exit, and he inhaled sharply.

“Shut up, Nandani. My mother, too, was my father's mistress. Additionally, you should not disrespect her in that manner. They are humans, we are humans,” He said, emphasising 'we'.

I instantly regretted what I had said. He was the son of a slave mother. I shouldn't have said that. “I am sorry, I'm sorry, please. I did not mean that,” I said, walking closer to him.

He abruptly strode away, saying, “I have some work,” I gritted, fisting my hands when he left and exhaled heavily.

I cannot expose her, so allegedly, when he has such blind faith in her, and is emotionally attached to her like that. Next time, I'd have to be clever with my words in front of her and him.

I thought about it and came back to my chamber to look after Hridhaan. But he was asleep, and Suman was already looking after him. I sat on the couch and started pondering things.

He was still after my family, even after our marriage. For him, they still were culprits. But it was not his fault. It was all Chandramukhi, his dearest Maasimaa, who must have kept the truth from him.

Later, an attendee informed me of Badimaa’s arrival in my chamber. I immediately went to the guest chamber to meet her.

“Badimaa, you should have called me,” I said, going to her, and she gave me a tender smile.

“I was just strolling around and then came to see you. Please sit,” I said, sitting beside her on the couch and smiling.

“How are you feeling now?” I asked her politely.

“I am feeling better. Now, I can die in peace,” she said, and I gulped, not understanding what she was getting at. “When all my sons were martyred in the war, my hope died because my husband was no good—as a husband, as a ruler, as a man. I was worried about our kingdom and my daughters-in-law. But, now I believe, under Rudra’s wing, our kingdom will be managed fairly and squarely,” she briefed her concerns.

“Your daughters-in-law, where are they?” I asked.

“They've paid a visit to their maternal home. Will be back by evening today,” she informed me.

Suddenly, Hridhaan’s cries echoed as Suman brought him out. “Nandani, he woke up crying,”

Badimaa looked at him and asked, “Who is he?” Suman handed him to me, and I stood up to calm him down.

“He is Hridhaan. His mother passed away six months ago, and his father died in the war. He was one of Ranaji's friends. Ranaji and I have decided to adopt him,” she listened to me and stretched forth her hands.

“Ohh, give him to me,” she said, and I handed him to her.

She patted his back and asked, “You know how to care for a baby?” I shook my head and said, “No, I don't. But I will learn with time,”

She remained silent for a few moments and reluctantly inquired, “One of my daughters-in-law lost her baby and then got widowed. She is in that trauma and has isolated herself from the world. If you don't mind, can she foster him?” I pursed my lips, unsure of what to say.

“Badimaa, I think you should ask Ranaji regarding this,” I said. She nodded and instructed one of the attendees to inform him to come and meet her.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

Following my conversation with Nandani, I felt furious and disappointed. I knew she was a princess, and her upbringing was different from that of commoners like us. However, the way she referred to my Maasimaa, her father's mistress, with a tone that conveyed disgust, troubled me.

We were married, yet there was an inexplicable detachment between us—perhaps because of our backgrounds, her social status, our differing perceptions, or the contrasting circumstances in which we grew up.

But she had to understand that my aunt was a motherly figure in my life. She raised us three. I had an idea somewhere that she wouldn’t be too benevolent with her, and I wasn’t expecting that either.

I understood her point of view as well. She was, in fact, right in her perspective because my Maasimaa was her father's mistress, who had spent a great deal of time with him. Therefore, it was only natural for her not to harbour any affection towards her.

Sighing, I walked toward the great hall when an attendant’s call caught my attention. When I turned to look at him, he bowed to greet me.

“Yes,” I inquired. “Ranaji, Prince Agastya and Prince Ranvijay have arrived at the palace,” he replied.

Hearing that, a gentle smile appeared on my face. “Ask them to wait for me in the great hall,” I instructed him, and before going to meet them, I thought of visiting the wounded soldiers.

Once I ensured everyone was receiving aid, I headed to the great hall. Upon entering the room, I found them relaxing on the couches.

“Ranvijay, Agastya,” I called to them. They sprinted toward me, throwing themselves at me. I spread my arms, embracing both my brothers and laughing heartily.

“Bhaisa,” Ranvijay pulled away, scanning me from head to toe. “Ranaji, must I say now?” he asked, while Agastya teased, being the youngest.

“I hope you won't imprison us now that you're a King, Bhaisa,” I replied, playing along. “I might,” and I pulled him into a tight hug.

“Jokes aside, I called you here because I have something important to discuss,” I said, and Agastya shook his head.

“No, no, no… I will not listen to anything before I meet my Bhabhisa. I've heard about her exceptionality and how she made you run after her,” he said mischievously, folding his arms in front of him.

I looked at Ranvijay, who stared blankly at him. He's always been like that—serious, calm, and mature, while the youngest is fun-loving and always up to mischief, seeking adventure.

My mother passed away giving birth to Agastya, so he never knew what a mother's love meant. Thus, we held Maasimaa in high regard because she took care of us.

“Agastya, listen to what Bhaisa has to say,” Ranvijay urged.

Giving him a look, Agastya replied, “No, you two rude brothers with a broody attitude cannot escape my excitement. I want to meet Bhabhisa first, that's it.” I sighed and placed my hand on his shoulder, making him look at me.

“Alright, Agastya. She is busy right now. But I'll let you meet her before lunch.” He beamed instantly and looked at Ranvijay, scrunching his nose.

“Whatever,” Ranvijay rolled his eyes.

“Okay, Ranvijay, we must appoint new members to rebuild the committee of high ranks in the royal court. I am proposing that you become my chief advisor,” I said, patting his shoulder to show how much I trusted him. He looked at me, surprised.

“Me? Bhaisa, do you think I can do it?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Yes, you are the most capable one for this. You possess political expertise, proficiency, and all the necessary skills. Your valuable suggestions will help in better governance of our kingdom,” I said, and he curtly nodded.

“Alright, Bhaisa. If that’s what you think, I am in. I'm glad to take the responsibility of the chief advisor and be of help to you and our empire—”

“And me, Bhaisa, what will I do?” Agastya interrupted, and I looked at him, placing my hand on his shoulder.

“You're good with figures and are sharp-witted, so I want you to handle the finances as a chief accountant,” I proffered, and he gave a quick nod. “Alright. I'm set,” he said.

“Now, you two have two days to outline new strategies and devise plans for the upcoming year for better administration of the palace and regulating our empire’s system,” I explained. “I want you to collect all the information on the royal holdings we have available at present, recalculate all these resources and report to me on how we can implement the new taxation rules that can bring concurrence to the Kingdom and the royalty,” I instructed, and they nodded sturdily.

“Of course, Bhaisa—”

“Ranaji,” an attendee cut in on our discussion, and I turned to look at him. “Yes, what is it?”

“Ranaji, Badi Ranisa is asking for you in the queen’s chamber,” He informed me, and I nodded.

“Alright,” I said, looking at Agastya and Ranvijay. “Why don’t you come to meet Badimaa?” I proposed.

Agastya nodded, but Ranvijay remarked, “Why don’t you both go first? I want to meet Maasima first,” I nodded and said, “Alright, I’ll be in the queen’s chamber. Join us later,” I told him, looking at Agastya, and they both nodded in unison.

I left for my chamber and found Badimaa holding Hridhaan in her arms. I sat beside her and played with Hridhaan, tickling him on his little tummy.

Badimaa put forward the idea of handing over Hridhaan’s responsibility to Bhabhisa.

“If Bhabhisa is willing to take the responsibility, I don’t see a problem,” I said, and looked at Nandani. “You, Nandani?”

I knew Bhabhisa; she was someone who could take the best care of Hridhaan.

It's not like Nandani couldn't, but she was too young to take responsibility for a baby. Additionally, I wanted only the best for Hridhaan, having witnessed his birth, and he was like my own child. Therefore, if Bhabhisa agreed to take responsibility, I would have no objection.

“No, no problem. I'm sure she will take better care of him than I,” Nandani said. I could sense that she trusted my decision.

“Perfect,” Badi Maa smiled, looking at Nandani and adding, “Also, Nandani, you can ask Rudra to give you a child of your own. He isn’t getting any younger, you know,” Nandani awkwardly glanced between us, fiddling with her fingers. I tried to control my smile, keeping my chin up.

“I’m still young, Badimaa,” Nandani chuckled, and Badimaa laughed too.

Suddenly, looking at my side, she asked, “What happened to your neck, Rudra?” She narrowed her eyes, inspecting my neck closely.

I immediately adjusted my kurta to cover my neck, trying to find an excuse.

“Ummm… Badimaa, I scratched my neck.” Nandani lowered her gaze, and Badimaa said, “Don’t do that again, it might leave a mark.” I nodded, assuring her.

“Badi Maasa,” Ranvijay and Agastya walked into the guest chamber, and she smiled in sheer glee.

“Ranvijay, Agastya,” Passing Hridhaan over to me, she rushed towards them.

Both my brothers bent to touch her feet to seek blessings. I noticed Nandani standing up and fixing her dupatta over her head.

“How are you, Badimaa?” Ranvijay asked, and she lovingly touched his cheeks, with tears glistening in her eyes.

“My children are here, I'm more than delighted,” And Agastya went near Nandani.

“Pranaam, Bhabhisa!” he greeted her, joining his palms in front of her. She regarded his greeting, joining her palms in return, when he said, “Bhabhisa, don't you think you're too tiny for my brother?” Nandani stood dumbfounded, her head spinning towards me.

I gave her an assuring smile to put her at ease.

“I think I’m perfect for your brother, Devarsa[41],” He chortled at her reply, making her smile.

“Pranaam, Bhabhisa,” Ranvijay too greeted her, and she acknowledged his gesture with a smile.

Although she knew I had two younger brothers, I stepped forward to introduce them, to break the ice, “Ranisa, this is Prince Ranvijay and Prince Agastya.”

She stood with her gaze low, and Ranvijay warmly said, “Welcome to the family, Bhabhisa.” She glanced at him, smiling courteously. “Thank you, Devarsa.”

Agastya chimed in with a wide grin and asked, “So, Bhabhisa, when are you planning to promote us to the position of uncles?” She gulped with wide eyes, and her flushed cheeks, with a tint of red, gave off her flustered state. I gave Agastya the eye, warning him not to tease her.

“Agastya, it seems like you are in a hurry to become an uncle,” Ranvijay said, patting his shoulder. He chuckled and scratched the back of his neck.

“No, Bhaisa, I was just asking,” he said again, looking at her. “Bhabhisa, do you know fencing?” She nodded, “Ji,”

His lips stretched into the broadest smile. “Perfect…. you know I always wanted a Bhabhisa who could combat,” she giggled. “So, when can we have combat?” he asked, and she looked puzzled.

“Tomorrow?”

“Perfect,” Agastya clapped his palms giddily, and as I looked at them, I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach.

She went on, laughing at his remarks, and not for once did she look at me while talking to him.

“I think you both should freshen up and have lunch,” I said, looking at them.

“Ji, Bhaisa,” they both left together, and Badimaa, too, went along with them, passing Hridhaan back to Suman, who stood in a corner all the while. She took him inside, leaving Nandani and me alone.

“Rudra, I didn't mean that earlier,” she said in a low, worried tone, and I furrowed my brows.

“I know we have differences, but please do not drag my family into any of it, especially my Maasimaa.” Her face suddenly changed into one of anger.

“Alright, I'll not speak to you about her. You may go on, degrading my family’s reputation and crushing my dignity as you please, but I should do nothing about it. Why do you think it is fair, Rudra? How does that even work?” She retorted.

“It works, Nandani, because I hate your family and I have justifiable reasons for it.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and snapped savagely, “Oh well, then let me enlighten you, Ranaji, I hate your aunt, and I, too, have justifiable reasons for it. And, now you are my husband, and I cannot see you getting misled by non-existent things,” I inhaled a sharp breath.

“You know nothing, Nandani.” She dropped her hands and sighed.

“You too, Rudra,” I fisted my hands, trying to contain myself.

“Your parents killed my father, because of which I lost the only hope of my life. They are responsible for whatever I suffered,” I clenched my mouth, not wanting to

lash out at her.

“I'm apologetic that you lost your father, but my parents did nothing wrong by killing him.” That was it, that was the last string.

I looked at her with firm precision, hoping she wouldn’t take it any further. “Don’t,”

She took a step towards me. “See beyond what you're told,”

Stepping forward, I, too, glared at her. “I wasn't told anything. Your parents killed him, and I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Your father abducted my mother,” she replied, staring at me with the same intensity and tension. I clutched her nape in my hold, jerking her closer to me, and looked into her eyes.

She pushed me away in a flash. “Don’t you dare do that again, ever, Rudra? I'm no object,” Her eyes flickered with tears as she spat at me.

“And my life is no game for you and your parents to play with,” I said, and she squinted her brows at me.

“I'm playing with your life? Me? You played with my life, Rudra, you. You played with my feelings, my esteem. You conspired with the game of love, and I very foolishly lost it,” she raised her voice, pointing her finger at me.

I sucked in a deep breath. “You made me do all of this, and it cost me. It cost me everything,”

She began retreating her steps, saying, “I am sorry. I’m sorry, I made you do all this.”

She turned around to leave the room, and I called for her, “Nandani.” She kept moving, not paying any heed to my calls.

“Nandani, don’t even think of walking out on me,” I said, but her walking away just like that heightened my fury.

“Nandani,” but she chose not to listen to me. I heaved an exasperated sigh.

Fine!

I returned to work, and for the entire day, I didn't meet her; I didn't see her, nor did she come to talk to me.

I went through some official documents and discussed them with Ranvijay and Agastya.

By the evening, Bhabhisa had arrived from her maternal home, and I had gone to meet her.

She was happy to adopt Hridhaan. Once done, I left her chamber to let her rest.

After finishing all my work and meeting the royal courtiers, I had dinner with Ranvijay and Agastya.

Later in the night, I retired to our chamber, which was strangely completely dark, with no lamps lit around.

I headed towards the courtyard, but she wasn’t there or anywhere around. The moon had already risen, scattering its light all around the place, but I couldn't find

her.

I saw her attendant, Suman, coming out of the bedroom, so I asked her, “Where is Nandani?” She answered in a polite tone, with her head kept low, “Ranaji, she's in the bedroom.”

“Did she have dinner?” I inquired, and she nodded, “Ji, Ranaji.” She left after answering me.

I felt bad for fighting with her. But, somewhere, she had to understand me. Her mother was promised to my father, and both her parents betrayed him and killed him later, because of which my brothers and I suffered for all our lives.

I sauntered towards her bedroom and found her lying on her stomach, playing with her flowy hair scattered at her side on the bed. It seemed like she was so immersed in the book that not once did she turn her eyes away to look at me.

I cleared my throat to get her attention, but there was no response. I could see her slender, fair legs dangling up in the air as she moved them swiftly, playing with the toes of her other feet.

Her anklet’s bells rang in the quiet chamber as I tread further. The room was dimly lit with a few lamps and candles around.

She was trying to seduce me.

I could feel her intense stare on my open back as I removed my kurta and lit more candles.

If it's a game she wanted to play, why shouldn’t I play along?

After lighting a few candles and lamps, I settled on the couch and placed a few papers on the table. Leaning forward, as I went through them, I could see her peeking glances at me from my peripheral vision.

She did not say a thing, and neither did I. She continued reading her book until midnight, while I kept going through the papers.

The tension was palpable in the environment. It seemed like a war about who would talk first.

Suddenly, I saw her climbing out of bed. Her long hair, swaying above her small waist, came into view as she ambled towards the bookshelf in the corner to return the book.

She stood there, softly brushing her hair with her fingers, detangling the curls at the end and tying them into a loose bun.

Something flickered in my chest when I saw her lean arms for the first time as she made the bun. Her backless blouse tempted me with a view of her exposed back, highlighting her shoulder blades. I instantly turned my eyes back to the papers, blinking uneasily.

I wasn’t supposed to look at her in that way. She was my wife. But, unintentionally, my eyes again stared at her as she moved back to the bed.

“Nandani,” I called her slowly, but she didn't reply and went towards the dressing room. I inhaled a deep breath and waited for her to come back.

Stepping out, she closed the door behind her, and I felt my heart elevate at an unusual rate when I saw her in a white nightgown that reached till her mid-thighs.

My insides flipped, seeing her bare legs and arms, and I immediately stood up from the couch.

I stopped her mid-way as she approached the bed and cornered her against the bedpost.

“You want something, Ranaji?” She asked, acting clueless, and I could feel she was still mad at me.

I tried touching her cheek, but she abruptly turned her head to the other side. Moving closer, I blocked her way, keeping my hand beside her face on the bedpost.

“I hope you remember what I asked you to do for me,” I said. She tried to leave from the other side, but I quickly placed my other hand beside her waist on the bedpost.

“I remember nothing, sorry,” she said, folding her hands over her chest. Leaning into her ear, I muttered, “I’ll make you remember, little wife,”

She pushed me away, glowering at me. “You may go to your quarters,” I inched closer and cupped her cheek to make her look at me.

“Dare you say that again, and I'll never step into your chamber,” I warned. She blinked, looking at me, and turned her gaze down.

“I’m sorry,” I gave in.

She closed her eyes, standing still as her cheeks flushed red. Slowly encircling her waist, I pulled her into a gentle hug.

“I am sorry, Nandani. I'll never say that again,” I mumbled, caressing her back as she succumbed to my touch.

“I hate you,” she murmured, and I kissed her head. From behind, I gently held her neck to make her look at me.

“You're not an object. If you don't like me holding your neck, I wouldn't do it, not in anger, not even when I'm calm. But never say that again,” I said. Her lashes fluttered swiftly as I glided my finger slowly from her cheek to her neck. It wasn’t easy to keep my hands to myself, as her sleek, delicate collarbones were right before my eyes.

Taking a few steps back, I dragged an armchair near the bed. Settling comfortably on it, I looked at her and said, “You were supposed to teach me something.”

Shifting her weight from one foot to another, she shook her head, blushing extremely. “No, I’ve never done it before,”

Biting my lower lip, I muttered in a low tone, “Lie down.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I swallowed a nerve-wracking lump in my throat at what he said.

“No,” I denied, looking down.

“I’m your husband. Lie down,” He ordered again. Heat seeped into every inch of my body at his commanding tone, rushing to my cheeks, making me feel timid. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought of this.

I did think of doing a few dirty things to him, tying his hands and so on, but this was absolutely out of context. My fingers trembled when I saw him sitting relaxedly on the chair, like he wasn’t in an eccentric and dirty mood.

“Let's just sleep,” I felt highly jittery under his scrutinising gaze as I tried to utter, my voice barely audible.

“Lie down,” he was insistent. Thus, inhaling a deep breath and finding some courage, I obeyed my husband.

I lay straight on my back, stretching my legs, but my heart was right at the edge of my mouth, all set to jump out anytime. “Are you going just to sit there?” I softly asked.

“Hnn-hnn,” he hummed distractedly, leaning forward, scanning my whole form. “Take off your bangles,” He instructed. The only jewellery I had on was my bangles and toe rings because I wasn’t supposed to take them off. And so I shook my head.

“I can't,” I said, looking at my hands, placed on my midriff, since I couldn’t bring myself to look him in the eyes.

“Look at me,” He said, but I was too flustered, anxious, and eager.

“Please come closer, I’m feeling so embarrassed,” he said, shaking his head. “No,” I replied, swallowing and fiddling with my fingers.

“Please, I'll do as you say, just lie down here with me,” a smirk tugged at his lips as he settled back on the couch, resting his arms on either side. “I'll sit here and you will do as I say. So learn it,”

I pursed my lips, taking a deep breath, when he ordered, “Suck your finger,”

“Fi… finger?” I stammered, gulping unsurely. His gaze was unfazed, and he mumbled in a low tone, “Yeah, finger, for now.” His gravelly, deep voice had me flushing.

I slid my finger inside my mouth, wetting it and took it out, turning towards him.

“Close your eyes,” I squeezed my eyes shut in the bat of an eye. “Take it between your legs,” he husked.

I shivered; my whole being felt enticed. “Are you sure?” he responded with a soft hum.

I slipped my finger on my folds, swallowing hard. I could feel his piercing eyes on me. It made me feel strange and indecisive, so I waited for his next command.

“Now, look at me,” he stated, and I opened my eyes, tilting my head to the side.

“Brush yourself with your finger,” I did as he told me. My breathing turned uneven under his intense gaze on my shuddering form as he looked at me in my most vulnerable state.

“Slowly,” he demanded, “Play with yourself... up and down, softly... with care,”

It began to affect me deeply. The way I followed his words, dancing on his fingertips, made me feel as though I was at his mercy.

My heart beat escalated as I raked my eyes at his toned chest, his fine abs, and his muscular hands. And even though I hadn't seen it yet, I could tell how strong and thick his thighs were under his dhoti.

While brushing myself, I suddenly felt a sensation erupt from the pit of my stomach, causing a low, shaky sound to elicit from the back of my throat. The weight of that feeling felt heavy on my lashes.

I bit back the moan that was about to slip off my mouth and forced my eyes closed. The noise of my bangles pierced through the silence. And, whatever it was, it began building stronger inside me, causing my thighs to tremble severely.

I lifted my lashes to look at him. The fact that he was watching me, doing that to myself, looking at me, feeling the way I was feeling, caused sparks to pass through my spine.

“Please, come closer,” I pleaded, my tone desperate and low, aroused yet timid. “Keep doing,” He rasped.

Suddenly, he stood up from the chair, making my breath hitch. My hand froze instantly, and I brought my legs closer and gaped at him getting near the bed.

He partly bent over my lying form, weighing on his palms, and I attempted to sit. But before I could decipher what was happening, he knelt on the floor and dragged me to the edge of the bed by my thighs.

“Rudra,” I gasped. I couldn’t do or say anything as he spread his hand across my chest and pushed me back, making me lie on the bed. I tried to move, but his hand was strong enough to suppress me.

“Ranaji,” I stuttered, wanting to remind him of his status and that he shouldn't be doing so as a king. But before I could voice anything out, he pressed his lips over my inner thigh and sucked on the muscle harshly.

“Ahhh…….” A loud cry escaped my mouth when he bit me there, and I immediately grabbed his head. My heart raced, and my head fell back on the mattress, making me hold his wrist over my chest. I knew the way he bit my skin would definitely leave a bruise.

He pulled away from my thighs and looked me in the eye. I tried to sit, leaning on my elbows to meet his gaze. My cheeks felt warm, and I shivered with anticipation as sensations ran down my body.

“Ranaji, you shouldn't be doing that,” I breathed. However, he took my right hand close to his mouth, beholding my eyes, and put my finger into his mouth. I went agape.

He tasted me, licking my finger, and I blinked my eyes steadily, feeling my stomach do somersaults.

This man was driving me insane. Totally. Never in my wildest fantasies had I thought of this. Especially him tasting me. Before our fight, he had never touched me, not even accidentally. And so I never thought he'd taste me like that.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of jitters, which had me part my lips, when he leaned closer to my core.

“Rudra,” I tried to call him, but he hummed, “Hnn-hmmm,” breathing on me. He pressed his lips on top of my cleft, and my brows pinched together like something had happened in my body.

I raked my hand through his hair when he put pressure on my lower lips, making me arch my back in expectation. My breathing turned ragged, my nipples perked up hard, and goosebumps raised on my skin when he flicked his tongue over my folds.

“Aaahhh….” I tried not to be too loud, but the way he began lapping on my skin hard, swirling his tongue deep inside, had me whimpering insanely. The sound of my bangles resonated in the big chamber, and my thighs shook, making me curl my toes as he nipped his teeth on my inner skin.

I hissed, feeling the pleasurable ache, and my hold on his wrist tightened, which had kept me immobile. He kept licking me, sucking me, making me moan until the last ounce of sanity left me.

My body turned wildly hot, my throat ran dry with all the moaning, and my knees turned limp, feeling ecstatic. My brain oozed with pure bliss, feeling his lips on my sensitive spot.

I squeezed the bedsheet with the other hand, biting on my lower lip when he delved his tongue way down in me.

“Aaahh… Ru... Rudra,” I could feel the energy draining from my body. My stomach stretched with the contractions, and my hair was completely tousled with all the quivering.

He tugged my nub into his mouth and kept sucking on it, not leaving me until I finally had my release. It felt like an explosion, which left me hazy by the end and caused my hands to drop to either side.

Kissing the inside of my thigh softly, he moved his face upward. I was breathless, huffing for air, and looked at his tousled hair, which fell over his forehead. His lips darkened and glistened with saliva, and I bit my lower lip when my eyes met his.

The smirk on his lips revealed his satisfaction as he looked at my state.

“You know nothing of seduction, little wife,” he said, hovering over me. I did not know why, but all my intelligence, learnings, and everything I knew were inadequate when he was in the picture.

I stared blankly into his eyes when he brushed my chin with his thumb and examined my face.

He pinned both my hands over my head and leaned into the side of my neck. I could feel his body weight over me when his lips grazed my collarbones, and he nibbled on my skin. It was slow at the beginning, but it became harsher.

“Rudra, please… I don't want to embarrass myself anymore,” I mewled. However, he deepened the assault on my neck. I could feel that he was creating marks on my skin.

“Aahh….” I moaned lightly, and he sat on his knees. Bringing his hands closer, he clasped my neck and caressed the side of my collarbone.

Never in my whole life had I seen such thirst on his face. It was raw and intense. His lips were swollen, and when he gulped, his Adam's apple bobbed, which made my insides flip.

I quavered under his unwavering gaze, one with a profound look in his eyes.

He balled the fabric of my cotton inner and suddenly, tore it apart. My breath stopped short, making me lie frozen under him.

Staring at my exposed chest, he brought his hand slowly closer and delicately brushed the back of his palm on my midriff.

He looked at my naked figure so vehemently, like he was reading every minor detail passionately, making me feel even more aroused. He closed his eyes for a moment, gulping sharply.

“Rudra,” I whispered to call him, and he moved his finger over my erect bud, striking it with his thumb.

“You are my death note from hell,” He muttered. Leaning down, he kissed his way across the valley of my breasts and sucked over my chest harshly, leaving a dark red bruise. I inhaled a deep breath; it felt strangely right.

Suddenly, he stopped and placed his forehead against my chest, exhaling heavily. I saw him latching onto the bed sheet beside my head, making his veins prominent in his arms.

“Rudra,” I called slowly, and he inhaled a deep breath. A guttural groan left his mouth.

“Damn it!” He raised his eyes to look at me, and his face changed like a cold wave had swept over him. He got off the bed and marched out of the chamber.

“Rudra,” I sat on the bed and called him, but he just disappeared. I blinked, not understanding what had just happened.

Something was wrong. I could feel it, and I could see it on his face. And it didn't seem like the usual wrong, related to his uncle or anything, but something else.

I calmed myself down and got down on the bed, and the moment I did, my legs felt weak, trembling slightly. It was throbbing down there; I could still feel his lips.

Quickly changing into a lehenga, I took the comforters and went to the courtyard.

I found him there, lying on the mat, staring into nothingness. He didn't look at me once. When I walked near him, he closed his eyes.

“I hate you, Rudra. You are a monster,” I muttered, and he opened his eyes, turning them toward me. He stretched his hand out to me, and I looked at it, puzzled. He pulled me by my wrist, and I fell beside him.

Covering both of us with the comforters, I closed my eyes.

“Is there something that I should know about you?” I asked.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

Her question made me nervous, unsettling my insides.

I exhaled softly, suppressing my restlessness, and cradled her in my embrace, my arm encompassing her waist. “I don't think so,” I murmured, and she frowned at me suspiciously, as if what I had just said wasn’t credible to her.

“Why’d you stop then?” She whispered timidly.

Peering into her intoxicating eyes, I asked, “You didn't want me to stop?” She blushed profusely, nuzzling her face into my chest.

“But I didn't ask you to stop. So why??” she asked, and I closed my eyes for a moment.

“Because you're so tiny,” I said.

She looked at me, flaring her nose in anger, making me chuckle.

“Don't say that,” she gritted. “But you are,” I teased again, and she turned her face to the other side.

“You call me tiny because you think I'm incapable of you.” She scowled at me, and I held her palm.

“See, how small your hands are in mine.” She looked at our intertwined hands. Her slender, cute fingers were not even half the size of my fingers.

“But waiting will not make me any bigger now, will it?” she said, plumping her head against my chest. I laughed at her statement and closed my eyes, feeling her warmth.

“The mole on your bosom looked sensual. Had me captivated at the very sight,” a bright crimson crept across her cheek at my remark.

“You, too, have one on your back.” I hummed, feeling drowsy.

I was someone who could fall asleep the moment I lay in the place where I usually slept. And so I dozed off playing with her fingers.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Early in the morning, I woke up and turned my head to the sight of her slumbering figure in my arms. Her long tresses rumpled over her face, and her beautiful lashes had me smitten.

I pushed the hair strands aside her face, and her eyes fluttered open. She glanced at me in a sleepy daze, and I fondled her soft cheek gently.

“Good morning, Ranisa,”

“Good morning, Ranaji,” she rasped in her morning voice, giving me a light smile.

I noticed her staring at my lips and nervously inhaling. Slowly bringing her hand close to my face, she brushed my lower lip.

“What is it?” I asked, and she moved her gaze from my lips to my eyes.

“You're a king now. You shouldn't be going down on a girl,” she said, and I pulled her closer.

I was truly amused by the paradox of societal norms. On one hand, I was forbidden from doing many things to become a king; on the other hand, even after becoming a king, I wasn't allowed to do all those things.

“I know, I'm forbidden from taking pleasures, but I can surely pleasure my little wife,” I said in a low tone, and she furrowed her eyebrows.

“Forbidden….? What’s that supposed to mean?” She enquired, looking at me with a dilemma.

I stared at her blankly, realising what had slipped from my mouth.

Under no circumstances was I supposed to tell her about my forbidden pleasures, because I knew she'd get furious if I did.

“Nothing,” I gulped, blinking my eyes away from her. She immediately sat up straight, flipping her hair behind.

“No, tell me. Who forbade you from taking pleasures? And why? And what pleasures are you forbidden from?” She hastily questioned, and I placed my head on her lap, trying to divert her mind from it.

“Rudra, look at me,” she said, holding my face and making me look at her.

“Nandani, it's nothing,” I tried to sound convincing, but she budged away, causing me to move my head. She shook her head in an urge.

“No, no, no, you take me for a fool. Tell me, who forbade you and has concocted these things in your mind? Wait—”

She was stunned momentarily, and what I feared the most happened.

“You stopped last night... because... You are forb…” Her eyes widened, and she audibly gasped, covering her mouth.

Her face was stricken with the flash of realisation. Tears shimmered in her eyes, and I shook my head in denial. She inhaled a sharp breath, crawling closer to me on her knees and held my hands.

“Rudra, please tell me it's not what I am thinking. You're not practising celibacy until the coronation, are you?” Her words faltered in an aggrieved tone, and she visibly swallowed the lump of distress. “Oh, wait... wa... wait! That is why you do not sleep in bed, you don't dine on the royal meals, you do not stay in the royal chamber, you do not let anyone do your things, you do not smoke, do not drink, you don’t hunt, you do not…” she turned breathless by the end of her revelations, and tears streamed down her eyes.

I closed my eyes, taking her into my arms. “Nandani,” I tried to calm her, but she broke into sobs.

“Rudra, do I even know you?” She pushed me away lightly and stood up to leave, but I stopped her, holding her wrist.

“Does this wedding mean anything to you?” she turned towards me, drawing back her hand. “Do I mean anything to you?” she asked, taking her steps back.

“You don't even have any feelings for me,” she stated, and I stood up, trying to hold her.

“Nandani, it is not like that—”

“I, too, am forbidden to you,” she rambled to herself, holding her forehead. “I thought... I thought you had feelings for me, something at least,” she choked up on her tears.

“Nandani,” I went near her and was about to touch her, but she stopped me, showing her palm.

“Oh! Ranaji, let me remind you that you are forbidden from touching me,” she said, moving back.

“Murkh the hum, aapke bichaaye jaal mein phans gayein” (Such a fool I was, I fell right into your trap). She walked away, talking gibberish. I sucked in a sharp breath, fisting my hands, trying to cool myself and knelt on the floor, closing my eyes.

I knew she'd get utterly mad when she discovered the truth and wouldn't like it. She wouldn't have married me at any cost if she had known about it. What I didn't know was what to do anymore.

“Ranaji,” Suddenly, an attendant called me, and I looked at him. “Ranaji, guests have arrived,” he informed me, and I heaved a heavy sigh.

“Ask Prince Ranvijay and Prince Agastya to receive the guests and look after the arrangements for their stay in the palace. I'll meet them in the royal court,” I instructed calmly.

“Ji, Ranaji,” he bowed and went away. It was a significant day for the empire, as I was to sign a peace treaty and trade contracts with neighbouring states for the benefit of the people.

I stood up and walked out to get ready for the royal summit.

Once I was ready in a simple white kurta with a red overcoat, I saw Nandani before attending to the royal guests.

Walking into her bedroom, I called for her, but she wasn't there. I checked the dressing room, but she wasn't there either. Coming out, I asked an attendee, “Where is Ranisa?”

She bowed and answered without meeting my eyes, “She might be in the Royal Kitchen, Ranaji,”

I immediately marched towards the royal kitchen.

When I stepped in, I noticed the chaos—women grinding wheat in one corner, some crushing dry spices, some chopping vegetables. I raked my eyes around to spot my queen in the crowd of the staff, but I couldn't find her.

“EKAANT!”

I ordered, and everyone dispersed right away, except for one girl working on the stone flour mill. Striding in her direction, I looked at her, still grinding wheat.

Despite my squatting before her, she continued what she was doing without paying attention to me. She wasn't wearing any jewellery or wedding bangles: just simple green bangles and plain clothes.

“Nandani, don't overwork in anger. You’ll fall sick,” I tried to stop her, but she moved her hand even faster, filling her other hand with the grains to fill the pit. She remained silent, ignoring me like I wasn't there.

“Aeeee, Nandani,” I held the grinder’s handle and stopped it to catch her attention. She breathed heavily in anger and stood up.

“Suman, Reva, Jayanti…” She yelled all the names, and I watched some attendants enter the kitchen again. “Keep working; the guests must be served with the best food,” she said, crushing the spices.

I followed behind, and now I was eager to even talk to her, especially with everyone around.

“Nandani, please,” I pleaded in a low tone.

She pounded the dry chillies with such force that their powder blew into the air. The moment I breathed, I coughed hard, feeling a burning sensation in my throat.

She deliberately did that. She too coughed. The surrounding attendees were eavesdropping on us.

“Nandani, please, don't be ang—”

“Suman,” she called loudly, cutting me off. Moving towards the flour grinder, she began grinding again, and I sat before her.

“Nandani, everyone is waiting for me in the royal court. But I don't want to meet anyone, leaving you angry like this,” I tried to convince her, and she instantly looked at me.

“I'm not angry, Ranaji,” she creaked, showing her fury. I asked, “So, why are you doing this? There are so many attendants, so leave it to them. They'll do it,”

She inhaled a sharp breath and moved her gaze to me. “No, I, too, am on a controlling period with you until you are,” she said, and I immediately held her arms.

“Are you in your senses?” I gritted in a whispering tone, and she yanked my hand away.

“No, but you are not allowed to touch me,” she said, and I inhaled a deep breath to keep my cool.

“Nandani, what are you playing at?” I questioned, but she ignored me again.

“Reva, heat some water, and come here, help me with the dough,” she said, standing up, dusting her hands right in front of my face.

“Alright,” I mumbled under my breath, and stood up. She seemed infuriated.

I looked at the female attendees working and helping her. It was only right that I left from there.

I went to the court where everyone was waiting for me. The royal herald announced my presence. ***“Saavdhaan!!! Rana Rudra Dev Singh, raaj sabha mein***

padhaar rahe hain….” (Attention!!! Rana Rudra Dev Singh is entering the Royal Meeting Hall….) His voice was so loud it echoed in the huge hall, vibrating my insides, boosting energy in my body.

The moment I stepped in, murmurs and gossip piped down, and everyone got up to greet me with joined hands.

“Welcome to Suryagarh,” I returned their greetings and walked towards the throne. Taking my seat, I told everyone to sit too. “Please, take your seats.”

I noticed my Guruji and immediately stepped down from the throne to take his blessings. Returning to my place, I ordered them to commence the meeting.

Ranvijay stood up, catching everyone’s attention. “Ranaji, we are all gathered here to establish a new peace treaty and make amendments to the percentage of taxes and duties in the current trade zones.”

I listened to him carefully and said, “Please introduce the revised contracts.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I, along with a group of attendants, went to the dining area to serve lunch to the royal guests.

Since it was the first official gathering of the kings of all the neighbouring states after his claim to the throne, we prepared a royal feast with utmost effort and dedication to welcome them.

It was necessary for our kingdom in terms of bilateral agreements and diplomacy between these states. If these kings hadn't approved him as the new king, our empire might have faced difficulties in imposing a new ruling system and amending laws to continue operating.

I had worn plain clothes, contrary to what the royals wear. I was devastated the moment I learnt about his celibacy. He never mentioned it to me, never once referred to it.

I was furious, but mostly hurt because I couldn't bear to see him suffering. My husband—sleeping on the floor, doing all his work, and then ruling a kingdom—I couldn’t tolerate that. I couldn’t stand seeing him have normal food, be a king, and work hard to stay fit. I couldn’t endure seeing my man stay away from me.

It felt as if I had made a wrong decision about pursuing him. Maybe I got in his way. I wouldn't have done that if I had known what he was going through to achieve his goals.

When I found out about his controlling period, I didn't have the heart to enjoy the privileges of being a queen, a royal.

No, it wasn't to get his attention or prove anything. It was more that I was hurt to know that my man, my husband, was sacrificing a lot to succeed in his plans. As his partner, it was my right and responsibility to stand beside him in all his good and bad times.

I replaced my wedding bangles with simple green ones and detached myself from everything that was a part of royalty.

Holding the huge curry bowl, I entered the dining hall with the other ladies.

All the guests were seated on floor cushions, their legs crossed, and wooden bajots placed before them for serving food. Each of them was busy interacting and talking.

With my face covered by the veil, I could see him talking to Ranvijay.

Perhaps the sound of our anklets caught their attention because then Agastya announced, “Lunch is here.” The flavorful aroma of food was probably so imminent that it brought a smile to everyone's face.

“Ranaji, yadi aapki aagyaa ho to kya hum bhojan parosein?” (Ranaji, if you allow, may we serve food?) An attendee, with her head bowed down, asked.

“Ji awashya.” (Yes, sure.) The attendees dispersed and started serving food to each guest individually. Like every other attendee, I, too, began serving the *Gatte* curry.

As I walked in his direction, I felt a weird tension rising between us. His eyes were pinned on my every move.

The room was hushed except for the clattering of the ladles and bowls, which suddenly made me conscious. The intensity of his gaze on me caused a significant spike in my heart rate, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“What are you doing here?” he muttered, but I chose not to answer and continued serving the curry. Suddenly, he held my wrist, and I stopped, inhaling a deep breath.

“Nandani, this isn't your place,” he gritted in a low tone, and I tried to free my hand from his grip without anyone's notice. “Leave right now,” he ordered.

“No, I'm a commoner now,” I whispered in reply. “I, too, have given up on the nobility and all kinds of pleasures,”

The scowl on his forehead clearly indicated that he didn’t like my words or actions.

“Leave, Nandani,” I pulled my wrist back from his hold and said, “No.”

I continued serving the food, and once I finished, I moved to a corner to stand with the ladies. He gestured to start the meal, and everyone began eating.

My eyes were fixated on him, sitting rigidly, hands fisted tightly on his knees.

He didn't touch the food, and I could tell just by his expressions that he didn’t approve of any of it—me serving like an attendant. His anger was evident on his face.

“Bhaisa, what happened? Why aren't you eating?” Ranvijay asked him, and he replied with a smile, “I’m fasting today.” Ranvijay seemed convinced, but I knew better.

First, he was sacrificing everything for the sake of the Kingdom, and now he wasn't even eating. I had no clue when he had been practising celibacy and why.

When exactly did he start practising that? After our marriage? But he was living like a commoner ever since I knew him.

Practising celibacy is depriving oneself of any pleasure, either sexual or from everyday life. And I didn't want him to deny himself the enjoyment of these riches and lead a life like a commoner.

He was a king now, and for the well-being of our kingdom, it was only right for him to take care of himself. He couldn’t just maintain a strict diet and suffer and sacrifice.

I looked at him, still not touching the food. I couldn't take it anymore, so I rushed out of the dining hall. The more I tried to get closer to him, the more he pushed me away.

As I recalled the past, I wondered if he willfully kept a distance from me. Thinking of it, I remembered how he never touched me before that night, and how he never got seduced by me, not once. He didn't love me.

It meant he was right when he said that I forced him to marry me. He would've let me marry any man if not for his uncle.

A lone tear trickled down my cheek as it struck me that I had misread everything and that he felt nothing for me. He never had. I thought he liked me, but then I found he married me to take revenge on the old king.

I returned to my chamber and let the tears flow freely from my eyes.

“Nandani,” I immediately dabbed away my tears when a familiar voice suddenly caught my ear. I stood up, looking at Badi Maasa's daughter-in-law entering the chamber.

“Jiji[42],” I smiled immediately, looking at her as she held Hridaan.

“How are you, Nandani?” She asked.

Taking Hridaan from her hands, I sat on the couch. “Now I’m happy,” I playfully answered, tickling him.

I met her on the day she returned from her maternal home. It was genuinely elating when she gladly agreed to take Hridaan’s responsibility and promised me she’d take the best care of him.

When I found out that she went through three miscarriages and did not have a child of her own, and how her husband died in a war, I didn't have the heart to say no to her.

“I hope he's not troubling you, Jiji,” I said.

“Oh, dear!” she laughed, saying, “Trust me when I say he is such an adorable kid. Thank you so much for trusting me with him. It is like I feel alive again,” she expressed emotionally, stroking his cheeks lovingly, and I smiled.

“He needed a mother, Jiji. And now he has you,” I replied. We continued our conversation, discussing various topics about Suryagarh’s history. In the middle of our talk, she mentioned the ninth chamber.

She also added that only the old king had access to it and that he had the key with him. Rudra would not be considered a king until he got the chamber key.

“But what is in that chamber?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don't know; I've never been inside,” I nodded, pursing my lips.

“Nandani,” His sudden call caught our attention.

“Devarsa,” Jiji smiled, and we both stood up. He greeted her and moved closer to me. Rage was very much palpable on his face.

“I was just leaving,” Jiji said, and took Hridaan from my hands. We both bid her adieu as she left the chamber.

In an instant, Rudra grasped my wrist tightly and led me to the bedroom. Saying I was scared would be an understatement. I was terrified when he yanked me inside

the chamber and slammed the door shut.

Suddenly, he pushed me against the door with my shoulders and asked in an alarmingly angry voice, “What the hell do you think you are doing?”

I gulped and narrowed my eyes, trying to comprehend his expression. “Me?” I raised my brows, and he immediately strangled me by my throat, making me shift on my toes.

“Yes, you. Why the hell were you serving the guests?” He spat in immense fury, and I gasped to calm my heart pounding against my chest.

He had caged me between him and the door, and that there was no escape from him had me on edge.

“I was just helping the attendees,” I stuttered, and he held my nape, pulling me closer.

“You-Are-My-Wife,” He spoke, emphasising every word, “And so you do not serve any other man. You are my queen, understand?”

I sucked in a sharp breath, as the proximity was making me dizzy. “You don't get to tell me what to do, just like I cannot tell you what to do,” I tried to speak with conviction, but my fear gave me away at the end.

He jerked my face even closer, crashing our chests, and raked his other hand around my waist.

“You have every right to tell me what to do. You are my wife,” he said.

“Drop this,” I muttered cautiously. He frowned in confusion, so I added, “Break this controlling period and live up to the position of the King you are, or I'll do whatever you will do,” I said in a calm, unwavering tone, looking right into his eyes.

Suddenly, his breathing quickened, and visuals of the previous night sprang into my mind.

My eyes subconsciously fell on his lips. Lips that sucked my sanity away, driving me to the brink. I could still feel that sensation, the raw contact of his mouth with my skin. During the morning bath, I spotted a bruise on my inner thigh.

He stepped back, held my hand, and walked towards the dressing room. “No way,” He said, dragging me with him.

“Ranaji,” I held his wrist to stop him. It was hard for me to keep up with his pace. He led me to the dressing room, released my hand, which caused me to swivel, and my back collided with the dressing table.

“Change your clothes,” He menaced, glaring at me.

“Change yours too,” I said, trying to hold on to myself. He took heavy strides towards me, towering over my frame, and my lashes batted rapidly in fear.

Placing his palm on the table beside my waist, he warned me in a threatening tone, piercing my gaze with his.

“Strip.” He commanded.

My heart just dropped in my stomach hearing those words, yet I shook my head. “No,”

Pressing his forehead against mine, he pulled the dupatta off my head from behind and said, “Nandani, strip, if you don't want me ripping your clothes off.”

My heart pounded at his words, but I kept my courage intact and retorted to his statement, “If you want me to strip, you will strip, too.”

He clutched my neck and breathed near my ear, “I'm warning you one last time, little wife. Don't make me tear apart every piece of these clothes and have you begging me to get dressed again.” His wild breaths turned me weak on my knees, and the tinge of intimidation in his tone churned my insides.

My heightened emotions weighed my lashes down, making me close my eyes in the moment’s relish.

Inhaling heavily, I opened my eyes again. Looking at him, I shook my head and muttered in a low voice, “Do whatever you want, Ranaji, but I won't let you go through this anymore. You’re proficient and can do anything with your expertise and capabilities. You don't need to follow these unnecessary, superstitious beliefs,” I explained, but he tightened his grip around my neck, making me part my lips.

He was angry and could’ve stripped me naked with the rage flaming in his eyes, yet at the moment, I didn't know what I was anticipating.

I should've been scared, but I felt butterflies fluttering in my stomach. And when his eyes fell to my heaving chest, it felt as if my heart were clawing its way out.

My nipples perked up the moment his eyes dropped over my breasts, and the plain cotton blouse did no justice to conceal my erect buds.

“Not necessarily everything you believe unnecessary is unnecessary, little princess,” he bitterly remarked.

Leaning closer, he grabbed the dagger from the table, making me shiver in fright.

I blinked nervously when he took the dagger close to his mouth, removed its sheath with his teeth and spat it on the floor, the sound of which resonated in the eerily silent room.

“Are you going to strip or not?” He asked in a dangerously low tone. Hair rose at every inch of my skin when my sight fell on the sharpened blade.

In fear, I reclined back, staring intensely into his eyes to grasp the drift of his emotions. But it wasn’t easy because there was so much on his face. It almost seemed blank, making it hard for me to decipher his expressions.

I placed my hand on his chest to calm him down and bring him back to his senses, which I believed he had lost long ago.

“Take your clothes off,” He threatened again, drawing the dagger along the length of my arm. Waves of anxiousness ran down my spine when the cold blade’s pointed edge came into contact with my skin.

I shook my head lightly and lowered my eyes to his jawline, unable to hold his fixed gaze. He moved my hand off his chest with his other hand and pinned both my wrists behind my back in a tight grip. I gasped heavily in terror, and my chest angled against his.

He stepped closer, pressing himself on me, placing his forehead on mine, which had the back of my head bump against the mirror. I felt immobile under his clutches.

As he moved the dagger towards my midriff, my brows furrowed in a frenzy. The chiselled object made me feel things I shouldn't have felt. And the second, he nudged my abdomen with the cold blade, and my gut wavered terribly.

His hold on my wrists hardened behind me, which caused my blouse to feel tighter, suffocating my bosoms, uplifting them sensually.

“Rudra,” I breathed. My breathing turned uneven, and I squeezed my eyes shut as he raked the blade over my skin and moved the tip under the hem of my blouse. I lost all my strength, because I knew a slight movement and my skin would’ve been ripped apart from the way he had me caged under him.

He rammed the blade through the cloth, and I heard the fabric tearing from my front. Suddenly, the blouse wasn't clinging to my skin. I felt goosebumps on my body and opened my eyes.

My face flushed with the heat as his free hand brushed against my collarbones, slowly slipping the sleeves off my shoulders. My entire form was no longer in my control, my lips wobbled, my legs shook, when his fingers trailed down my cleavage at a painfully slow pace.

“Be my strength, Nandani. If you continue to contradict me like this every time, I swear I'll not be able to do anything. I've done all this so you do not have to live like a commoner. And seeing you in these servants’ clothes, you called upon my miseries.” Inching even closer, he looked intensely into my eyes and stated further,

“You are a queen, not because you were born a princess, you're my queen because I won a fucking kingdom for you,” he said.

He moved his hand from my elbow to my bare midriff, deliberately stroking the outline of my breast. I forced my lashes close and steadied myself to ask the biggest nightmare of a question.

“Have you slept with anyone before me?” I asked. He cupped my right bosom with his left hand, and I felt sensations run through my body at full tilt.

“No,” he mumbled. The texture of his palm was rough against my skin; my breast seemed too small in his hand.

“When was the last time you had your release?” I asked in a trembling tone. He inhaled a deep breath, and tears collected in my eyes from his silence. A part of me had a clue, but I didn't want it to be true. He pressed my breast harder, and the sparks from his touch became unbearable for me.

“Aahh…” I moaned loudly, closing my eyes, feeling aroused. He placed a chaste kiss at the back of my ear and I sucked in a deep breath when he caressed my bud with his thumb gently, back and forth. I was feeling hot, yet a thought lingered in the back of my mind.

“You are going to be my death in bed,” he muttered against my ear, kneading my bosom hard.

“Ah… Rudra,” I whimpered, and he moved his cheek close to mine. His newly grown stubble rubbing against my cheek, his warm breath fanning at the side of my neck—I couldn't stand it all. The extremity of our intimacy, the fervour between us, made my head drop back.

“Nandani,” He groaned, and leaving my wrists, he sneaked his hand around my waist and shoved me up, sitting me on the dressing table. With his other hand, he kept fondling my bosom, teasing my erect nipple, pinching it between his fingers. I immediately coiled my arms around his shoulders as the sudden move took me away.

“When did you last masturbate, Rudra?” I asked again, my tone faltered, and he pressed his palm roughly against my chest.

“You wouldn't want to hear it,” he said, pulling the other sleeve of the blouse down and removing it from my body.

Planting a kiss on my neck, he made his way down my collarbone, sucking my skin gently and with his other hand, he cupped my other bosom too. When he kneaded both my delicate parts, I moaned senselessly near his ear, trying to contain myself in his muscular arms.

“Ah… Rudra,” He was pushing my limits, making my brain ooze with pleasure and on the spur of the moment, it completely slipped off my mind to get answers from him.

I went crazy when he started playing with my breasts, lightly massaging them. The wetness surfacing on my core had me rolling my eyes in sensation. My hair was all over the place, and when he slid them away, moving his lips towards my chest from my neck, I gasped in ecstasy.

“Ahh…” He had me in the palm of his hand, just with his touches, at his mercy. I wondered what would happen when he'd take me in all my senses.

“When was your last release, Rudra?” I asked again. Attaching his mouth to my swollen bud, he mumbled under his breath.

“Almost ten years ago,” The moment I heard it, I felt the rug sweep off under my feet.

“Rudra,” I called him, but he was very much indulged in sucking my bud harshly, making the blood rush to my cheeks.

“Ahhh…” I cried out, trying to hold his face and muttered,

“Rudra, calm down, please, you might end up hurting me,” I breathed with an urge, and he nipped on my nipple, whispering, “Don’t worry, I won't lose my

senses until I'm inside of you."

I shuddered violently because his words truly shook my insides when I tried to visualise the scene for a moment.

"I might die, you know," I remarked in a low tone. Bringing his face back to the north, he fisted my hair from behind and impulsively clashed his lips with mine. He sucked on my bottom lip with a zeal, a desire so strong dancing on the tip of his tongue. His kissing me aggressively made me close my eyes, unable to restrain the fervour.

I turned breathless, my heart went ballistic, and my cheeks burned, feeling the heat between us. He kept devouring my lips, sucking them incessantly and so I couldn't help but give in to the kiss. His hand, still playing with my nipples, pinching them, which made me part my lips, making me moan into his mouth.

He angled my nape to have better access to savour my lips. As the efficacy of our kiss intensified, I placed my hand over his on my chest. And he pulled back, grasping that I needed to breathe.

With his forehead still against mine, he breathed over my lips, "Therefore I tell you, don't seduce me, getting on my head. Let me take it slow," I laboured to inhale when he moved back, letting in some air.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked, frowning at him, probing further, "You didn't sleep with me, right?" He squeezed my breasts again, and I shrieked, feeling the sensations.

"Ahhh…"

"Did you refer to in your letter that you wanted to sleep with me?" He countered, and I gulped, narrowing my eyes and trying to recall what letter he was talking about.

"Oh, yes! The letter," I remembered how he told me to transcribe everything I wanted him to do with me in a letter.

"What did you write about?" He asked, and I batted my lashes away, unable to look at him, and he pinched my nipple, earning a painful cry from me.

"What did you write, little wife?" He asked again, hints of mischief very much apparent in his tone. I tried to calm my racing heart, and I murmured,

"I want you around me…" He stared intently at my lips, "Hnn-hnn," a throaty sound left his mouth, and I swallowed hard,

"Your touch... that will blaze my… skin… on f... fire and…" Inhaling sharply, I went on, "... burn me to the bones… which eventually… will enlighten every inch of me," I stuttered, my words and feelings all over the place.

I was compelled to shut my eyes, giving in, when he kissed me again. I recalled my love for him, the times when I longed for his presence, and the way I waited for just a glimpse of him.

"And?" He drew back momentarily, and I opened my eyes to reply to his question, "I want you to see me more than anyone ever did. I want to see you more

than anyone ever did. I want us so close, our breathing feels wild and warm on our faces, I want us to be one, for once and for all,”

Suddenly, he peeled the kurta off his body, making me shudder, and my eyes dropped to his naked chest. His wounds were healing, and the mark of my name was still visible on his arm. I thought of everything he did for me, every time he warned me not to marry that old man.

The look of agony that glistened in his eyes before our wedding, the distress I saw on his face for his fellow soldiers after our wedding. And even though the physician’s vague judgement bothered me, I gradually came to realise that he didn't sleep with me, he never did.

Had a man, practising celibacy for ten years, intercourses with a woman, there was no way she'd be able to walk the very next day, especially when the man was as robust as he was. With how he made me feel, I could imagine how difficult it would be to be in bed under him.

My flesh crawled at just the thought of it. *But would he ever do that? Will he ever love me*? I wondered.

“Will you ever love me?” I almost whimpered at the stinging sensation when he harshly groped my breasts.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I felt my control hanging on a loose thread, just an inch away from falling apart.

Her scent, her voice, and long curls cascading on her tiny waist were all irresistible.

My hand instinctively began to play with her delicate skin. And the way she reacted to my touch, with moans, all of her, started clouding my understanding.

Never in my whole life had I thought that my thoughts would get stirred so much by a woman, a girl, to be precise, a tiny, young and sometimes immature girl.

Her lips were swollen and her cheeks bloomed with crimson, her body felt warm, and her hair was dishevelled from my torture. Yet the loose tresses falling on her front couldn’t mask that purple mark I gave her the night before on her cleavage line.

Looking at her in that state, subject to me, I felt taken away enough to reconsider my celibacy. I looked into her eyes and muttered, “No.” I mouthed the answer over her lips.

Hurt flashed across her face as she pushed me away with all her might, causing me to lose my balance and fall onto the settee. She immediately put on her dupatta, hiding herself from my view, and stepped down from the table.

“I will not either,” she said, trying to walk away, but I pulled her back by her waist and made her sit on my lap.

“I already do.” The moment I said so, her face was layered with shock.

“You love me?” She asked, tilting her head to one side, her face struck with confusion. I hugged her tighter and pressed my lips to her collarbones. A soft whimper left her mouth.

“Yes, I do,” I accepted, closing my eyes, trying to convey my true feelings.

“I can remain celibate for another decade for you, Nandani. I can kill for you and get killed. I can win kingdoms and lose them for you. I can create a whole new world and reduce this entire world to ashes for you. I really can,”

I swept my palm against her naked back and pulled her even closer in my embrace. Her heart beat wildly. Yet I didn't stop, I couldn't stop.

“But I cannot see you working for anyone. I don't want you to change for me and adjust to my practices. I can't see your face flickering with hurt. I can't stand the sight of your eyes, full of admiration, looking at someone who’s not me. I cannot see you smiling in front of anyone but me. I can’t see you love someone but me,” I said and felt her shiver in my hold.

“I take full responsibility for what I did, and I'm ready to apologise for all my life, night and day, every moment until you tell me to stop. This is how much I regret my actions,” I confessed, feeling the muscles on her back flexing.

“Rudra,” she whispered, trying to stop me.

“Shhhh… let me speak today,” I cut in and lowered my lips to her ear. She slanted back her head slightly, and I continued, “I didn't like you when I first met you. I thought you were a spoiled, egoistic princess, blinded by the power of being a royal who looked down upon their subjects. So, I made a plan, a trap to make you fall for me. I began spending time with you, and as the days passed, I thought I was succeeding in my plan because you started liking me as I wanted. However, in the process, I got to know a great deal about you and your mannerisms—how you respect your elders, how you take your time for your lessons, and how you help the servants in the kitchen because you enjoy cooking for your family. Above all, I saw how you approached the commoners to listen to their problems and to understand them. During the three months I spent in your palace, you never made me feel any different from you. Then, one day, when you were late and I was waiting for you, I came to a realisation that I wasn’t winning; rather, I was losing at my game.” My voice faltered by the end, and she kissed my ear softly and asked, “Then?” I stroked her back gently, feeling her softness.

“I realised I wasn't just trapping you; you were becoming my habit. At that moment, it struck me how consuming your presence was for me. I felt the wall of my control cracking, which I built with so much effort for eight years. And so, like a coward, who couldn't deal with his emotions, I ran away,” I said, and she held my arms, trying to look at me.

“You're not a coward,”

I gulped, holding her tighter. “I am. I was and probably always will be,” I said, and she shook her head. “No,” she said, and I went on.

“I was a coward because I adopted shortcuts to win over your empire. I was a coward because I couldn’t control the feelings that had started developing for you. And then I showed cowardice again when I chose to run away from my feelings, from you. I was a coward because I was losing, yet I kept on with my controlling game for another two years, burning myself in the fire, drowning myself under the depth of the river. I tried to control my pain by hurting myself, tried to conquer my fear by climbing heights, tried to kill my hunger by starving for hours. I did everything, every damn thing, that my master taught me. Things that would help me become a better person and a better king. I tried to control my anger and my brain to keep myself in check and achieve my goals. But, nobody ever told me how to control my memories, how to control my heart, which has immense love for my mother, which has utter hate for your parents and which beats for you, Nandani.” My eyes were closed as I opened my heart to her. She pushed me lightly to look at me and caressed my cheeks.

“You are not a coward, you are my king. You always were,” I shook my head.

“This isn't as simple as it seems, little wife. I’m not sure, but I’ve never been like this. I was never this impulsive, this possessive. I was never insecure and wasn't scared of anything. I never opened up to anyone like I did today. I wasn’t ever like

this. I’m still striving to focus on my goals, rebuilding this empire and ending the miseries that the people of Suryagarh have endured for almost three decades now. But every time I look at you, I lose my control. The more I try to restrain my emotions, the more they slip through my hands, as anger, as possessiveness, as hunger for you,” I elaborated, playing with her hair strands, and she started trembling, listening to me.

“I feel so damn hungry for you, Nandani. You do not know… You have no idea how I try to control myself around you. You are my death, little wife,” I uttered on her lips, pulling her even closer.

“Eat me then,” she said, swallowing visibly, and I pecked her ear. “Be as wild as you want with me and satiate your hunger of a decade. Devour me as you want until you are satisfied. Claim me and mould me the way you want,” she added, and I shook my head.

“No,” The silence followed for a moment, and she asked under her breath,

“Because I’m not a virgin?” The moment she said it, I felt like someone had wrung my heart. I inhaled deeply near her neck to get a whiff of her scent and calmly said.

“I don't care, Nandani. These things don't matter to me. This context of purity, virginity, seduction and all of that might matter to other men. I don't care if you are a virgin or not. If I did, I would’ve never married you after I saw you stepping out of that old man’s chamber,” as I finished, she immediately threw a series of questions at me.

“You don't care? Why? You said you are possessive about me.” I noticed a mole behind her ear, and tucking the strands of her hair behind her ear, I said, “No, I don't care. I’m possessive about you? Yes. Your body? No. You are more than just your body; you have a soul. There is a human in you, an element of the divine in you. There is love in you, and there is so much in you just apart from your body, little wife.” She blinked at me naively.

“This is so deep, Ranaji.” I kissed her bare shoulder and said, “I don't want to eat you, I want to win your heart. I'm attracted to you, probably because my control of ten years is slipping slowly off my hands now. But there is so much in me that I have for you. I look up to you for treating everyone equally. I respect you for choosing me, even when I was at my lowest, and I’m grateful to you for helping me realise my mistakes. I admire you for fighting against the world, and it’s only you who gave me the strength to face my fears. It is only for you whom I created all this mess for, my queen.” Tears pooled in her eyes.

She whispered, “Rudra.” I petted the side of her neck with my lips, leaving feathery kisses on her collarbones and said, “Be my strength, Nandani. I can't break my celibacy until my coronation. I've taken an oath to claim the throne rightfully. The old King is still alive, and I don't want to wear the crown until I kill him, and until every single person of Suryagarh accepts me as the king.” I moved towards

her face and kissed her cheek and instructed, “And don't you dare change yourself for me. You are my Queen. Don’t cook unless it's for us. No wearing these servants’ clothes and no stubbornness. I cannot fight the world after setting my own house on fire. You are my home, my strength. Don't make me weak, don't make me see you doing all these things. I love seeing you as a queen sitting beside me, who can conquer and rule the world. Don't just be my wife, Nandani, be my queen,” she nodded lightly, and a tear fell from her eyes.

“You want me to be a Queen, and also want me to see you sleeping on the floor, eating simple food, doing your chores on your own, see you punish yourself for no reason and suffer, controlling yourself for something so meaningless,” she spoke bitterly, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

“Alright, I'll do that,” she said, standing up from my lap. I fisted my fingers with the loss of her touch. She walked behind the room divider, and I followed suit. I pinned her against the wooden wall and said,

“Please try to understand,” I said, gulping. She fisted her hands on my chest.

“You want me to understand? What about you? I can’t see you controlling your emotions. I, too, have feelings for you, I, too, care for you, I, too, am possessive about you, and I am insanely in love with you, Rudra. What do we do about that?” She broke into sobs.

“But you go on with your goals. Make your empire, rebuild it, and do everything an ideal king should do. Who am I? Why does it matter what I want? You left me hanging in between, yet I understood. You played with my feelings, I understood. You used me for your game, I understood. After all of that you did, you wanted me back, I understood that too. But you don’t want to understand that I care for you, right? You wouldn’t care if it hurts me to see you in pain, right?” She exclaimed, pushing me away as she took her clothes out of the trunk.

“Nandani,” I tried to call her, but she showed me her palm. “Don't worry, Ranaji. I'll do as you say,”

I immediately pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly. She squirmed to break free, but eventually hugged me back. Her upper body was covered with just a dupatta, and I brushed her nape softly.

“It's so difficult to convince a stubborn kid,” I teased.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

“Don't call me a kid,” I slapped his back, and he tightened his hold on me.

“But, you look like a kid,” he again mocked me, and I pulled away from the hug. “Well, because I'm not a giant tree like you,” I said and dabbed my eyes with the end of my dupatta, cleaning my tears.

“Do I look like a tree?” He asked, ridiculed, and I nodded, “Yes. A tall, gnarled, controlling and such a rigid tree,” I replied and, stepping closer, he picked his clothes out.

“Come, my plant,” I looked at him, puzzled, “Plant?” He nodded, walking with me with his hand on my shoulder.

“Yes. If I’m a tree, you’re my plant. Tiny, annoying but cute,” I scowled at his logic, and he chuckled, making me stand in front of the mirror.

“Let me help you get dressed,” He said, standing beside me. I instantly shook my head.

“No, I don't think you should. You’re a king and my husband, and such work doesn’t suit you,” but he stepped closer and pulled the dupatta off my shoulder.

“So, you just want me to tear your clothes and not help you wear them. How considerate of my wife,” he said, flashing a phoney grin, and took the blouse in his hands. I glanced at him as he was trying to figure out the pattern of the blouse, and when he did, he slid the sleeves through my arms. I smiled, shaking my head at his silly fit.

“What's the use of you ripping my clothes when you can't do anything? I took you for a lion, but you turned out to be a kitten,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek, and he chortled at my statement.

“Kitten?” I nodded, adjusting the blouse on my shoulders. Holding the strings, he asked, “How tight do you want?” I smiled, remembering the last time he tied them.

“You can tie them as tight as you can. But, I want to know, how tight do you want?” I playfully questioned, leaning back, and saw him smirking in the mirror. Suddenly, he fastened the strings too tightly, making me squeak.

“Aaahhh…” My chest compressed, making my mouth drop open to breathe.

“This is how tight it will feel and this is exactly how you will react, for the whole night,” He whispered near my ear, stirring my desires.

“How would you know?” I asked, taking a shaky breath, and he boasted, “I’m a self-aware man.” He looked at me through the mirror while tying the strings right.

“May I take your skirt off?” He asked, hugging me from behind, and I held his hand over my midriff, saying, “You’ve already seen everything, why ask now?”

My lips trembled at the tickling sensation when he glided his fingers over my waistline to untie my skirt. The lehenga pooled at my feet as he undid the knot, revealing my unclad legs to his eyes, and he lightly traced his fingers across my inner thigh.

“Do you still feel me there?” He asked, and I was reminded of the previous night when he ate me raw. I nodded, and stroking my lower abdomen, he said,

“Tell me whenever that feeling fades away,” I took deep breaths to calm myself and asked, “Why?”

“To make sure you feel me every time you walk, every time you sit, every time you bathe. I want you to feel me all the time, every single day,” he said, passing me a new lehenga. With shivery hands, I took it from him and put it on.

“You won't do anything, yet you want me to feel you. That’s not fair play,” I retorted, tying the knot over my waist.

“I want you to get accustomed to that feeling before I claim you wholly. You’ll need that to bear me throughout the night,” He mumbled in my ear. I swallowed hard, holding his wrist. He was making me feel aroused just by his words.

“Will you do it?” I asked because it seemed like a dream.

“One day, and very badly,” I was tantalized by his deep, rumbling voice, by our quiet surroundings, and our intense discussion, and so I seduced him back.

“What do you want to do with me?” Caressing my waist with his fingers, he replied,

“Everything a husband does to his wife, everything you’ve learnt and everything you haven't, everything you don't know yet, and every dirty thing that exists in this world,” he said, and a thousand butterflies erupted in my stomach.

“Don’t play with me, Rudra, if you will do nothing to me.” He pulled me closer to him, crushing my waist. I could feel the muscles of his firm chest flexing against my back.

“You don't like me teasing you?” he asked with mischief dripping from his soft tone. Casting my eyes low, I exclaimed, “I like it. But you aren't letting me seduce you. You’re playing with me.”

He kissed the side of my jaw, saying, “Good. That's how it should be. So you know who’s in power, my little seductress.” He stifled a smile and folded my hands against my chest; I beamed with pride.

“I am in power because you're losing yourself to me,” I said, and he smiled at my statement.

“I know your game, Nandani. I know what you’re playing at since that night. You made me run head over heels for you,” he said, and I immediately responded, “Because you weren't ready to accept your feelings for me.”

Kissing my shoulder, he said, “I know, and I’m glad you did. Because if not, I would’ve killed every man you’d try to marry,”

And I laughed lightly, “It means you wouldn't have let me marry anyone but you.” Grazing my torso, he said, “Not in this life and not in the next six.” A comfortable silence engulfed us for a few moments.

“Nandani,” breaking the silence, he called me gently, with an intent look and something more—something I couldn't name. I hummed at his call, and he said, “I think I love you.”

A bewildered smile was etched on my face. “You think?” I asked, tilting my head. He nodded, “Yes. I think I have loved you since the moment I first saw you.”

Tears misted over my eyes. “If so, then why did you leave me?” He clenched his jaw, “Because I hate your parents.” I chuckled at his audacity, shaking my head. “I too love you and I hate your Maasi maa,” I said.

He smiled. “Tell me something I don't know, my little death-note,”

I inhaled a shaky breath, closing my eyes and bracing myself, “I didn't sleep with your uncle,”

A sudden void filled the air, dropping the room’s temperature, making my heart throb in my chest.

Composing himself, he turned me around by my shoulder, making me look at him and questioned, “What?”

I gulped hard and said, “I did not sleep with the old king.” The moment I said it out loud, he pushed me against the mirror, clutching my neck loosely, raising my chin to look him in the eyes.

“What the hell are you talking about?” He gritted, looming over me, his chest puffed and gaze piercing through mine.

“I’m saying that I went to his chamber. But with Suman’s help, I spiked his drink and even before he could see me, he fell unconscious,” I stammered anxiously, and his grip firmed around my neck.

“Why the hell did you lie to me?” His brows creased together, face contorted with fury.

“Because I was hurt… and angry,” his neck muscles tensed as he inhaled sharply at my reason.

“That doesn't justify you lying to me. You know I hate it when people lie. I hate it the most,” He spat, and I held his wrist to loosen his grip.

“Rudra, please calm down,” I tried to tame him, but he stepped back, swatting my hand away. He palmed his face, and I just stood there, staring blankly at him, tears streaming down my face.

“Rudra,” I called him. He looked at me, his face flushed red.

“Don't talk to me. Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you lie to me? All this while, I thought I had made an immense mistake. I was guilty, because I thought you slept with him because of me, that I caused everything that happened to you. You cannot imagine what I felt. And, here you’re now, humouring me, ‘Oh

it was just a joke’,” He yelled, turning breathless by the end, and I tried to step closer to him, my legs shaking badly.

“Rudra, listen to me,” I tried to say, but retracing his steps, he pointed his finger at me to keep from getting closer to him.

“Stay away from me. I hate liars. I opened my heart to you only to discover that this was all a joke for you. Me, killing thousands of people was just a joke for you,” His voice grew louder as he fumed his words out.

“It wasn't a joke; it's my life,” I tried to say, but tears blurred my vision. He nodded, clenching his fists. Without saying a word, he stormed out of the dressing room.

“Rudra,” I quickly set my dupatta on my head and dashed out. I almost ran behind him, but he just walked away.

“Ranaji,” I called out, but he was gone, and I just stood there numbly, looking at him, going away from me, again. A lone tear fell down my cheek.

“Bhabhisa,” I suddenly heard a familiar voice call out to me. I instantly spun away to wipe my cheeks and turned to find Agastya standing at the door. Adjusting my dupatta, I plastered a smile, and he stepped inside the chamber.

“Devarsa,” I said, and he plopped on the couch.

“What happened to Bhaisa?” He asked casually, picking up the grapes from the basket, before having a bite.

“He’s angry with me,” I sighed, slumping down on a couch across from him.

“He hates kids, I believe,” he commented with a smile, and I shifted awkwardly in my seat, a strained smile etched on my face. “Don’t worry; I know how to help you make it up to him,” he said, moving his fingers animatedly in the air.

“Really?” He nodded, and I asked, “How?”

“Annoy him until he listens to you.” He grinned evilly, chewing the grapes, and I knitted my brows together.

“Annoy him?”

Sitting back relaxedly, he hummed.

“He will kill me if I do,” He chuckled at my words and shook his head. “He will not. He likes you. And you are much younger than he is. You can bother him like a kid,” He said, and I swung my head in denial,

“That's not a good idea,” I replied.

“This is the best idea, Bhabhisa. I have always used this trick. Whenever Bhaisa was mad at me, I'd pester him, not letting him work or do anything. Just give it a try.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

After an ‘insightful’ discussion with Agastya, I returned to my chores to distract myself from whatever happened with Rudra, which, to be honest, did not work.

It hadn’t been a week since we married, yet we were magnetically drawn to each other. We worked through our personal issues together, trying to fight the world. But I was in a dilemma.

A part of me felt angry about what he did and was reluctant to forgive him, while another part wanted to overlook everything and simply love him.

I loved him; there was no room for doubt. But at what cost? At what cost did I love him? My dignity? My self-respect?

As a daughter, I was responsible for preserving not only my family’s honor but also my empire’s image as a princess. I knew that if rumors reached the old king’s ears about my affair with a young man, it was certain that the hearsay would spread throughout Indira.

And so I failed, both as a daughter and as a royal.

I was clearly crestfallen that I couldn’t grasp his underlying intentions, but I was also happy that he loved me now. The absurdity of our situation was that I could comprehend his circumstances even though he had deceived me and resented my parents.

He grew up in an environment completely different from mine, and I could tell just by looking at him that he had been burdened with responsibilities from a very young age. I’d never seen him laugh freely, enjoy life, or have a good time like a normal person. He’d either talk about politics, his responsibilities toward the kingdom, or some profound philosophies.

But even though I had witnessed remorse on his face, I still couldn’t bring myself to forget everything and move on after his actions. No love, no emotion, and no apologies could undo what my parents endured because of a flawed upbringing.

My mother always told me that children are like wet soil, and parents are like potters. They shape that clay into a fine, glazed object. One wrong move could leave a bad impression.

Yet I couldn't hate him for that. Never.

Because he was making efforts to change, to open up, and, most of all, he accepted me the way I was—undignified. However, I still found it difficult to adapt to his anger, values, and beliefs.

I held no personal grudges against him practicing celibacy, but it saddened me greatly every time I saw him forgoing the pleasures of life. He had seen thirty summers and was at the age when people were meant to take the most delight in life.

But I couldn’t understand what else he wanted. All his life, he had worked hard enough, straining himself and sacrificing his joys to become a king. Yet now that he had become a king, why wasn’t he easing himself a little from all the hassle? How could it be beneficial if the privilege of being a king did not bring him happiness?

And I resented the fact that he strived so hard to become a king just to avenge his father’s death. The father, about whom he knew nothing, and I didn’t know what kind of reaction to expect from him once he discovered the reality—the truth of his father and the woman he called his Maasi maa.

He despised lies and liars. Regardless of the circumstance, he remained truthful, even if the truth might cost him his life. I was concerned about his possible emotional reaction when he discovered that the entire story of his upbringing, beliefs, and sacrifices was based on a lie.

I absolutely despised the sight of him suffering and in pain. That was the very reason I didn’t want him to continue with celibacy; if it hurt me so much, I couldn’t imagine how much it would hurt him.

My whole day passed while taking a stroll around the palace with Suman. I visited the soldiers, met Badimaa, and stopped by the servants’ quarters to listen to the royal household staff’s needs and complaints.

I asked Suman to note everything, and in the evening, we both prepared a detailed report on all the changes needed in the servant’s quarters. Later, I documented the report chronologically on paper scrolls to officially communicate it with Ranaji.

Once we were done, I told Suman to take a rest. When she was about to leave, she paused and said, “Oh, Nandani! I forgot to tell you something.” I furrowed my brows and asked, “What is it?” She looked at me, surprised, and asked, “Don't you know what happened in the courtroom today?”

I had no clue what she was talking about, so I asked, “No. What happened?”

Coming closer, she sat beside me and said, “In today’s meeting, the king of Songarh has put forth a condition to accept a peace treaty with Suryagarh.” My heart suddenly dropped at this information, and I immediately asked, “What condition?”

“He has proposed Prince Ranjvijay's alliance with one of his daughters,” the news left me completely taken aback.

“Really? And what did Ranaji and Devarsa say?”

“Ranaji was about to say something, but Prince Ranvijay accepted the proposal, considering the peace of Suryagarh and its people.” She filled me in on the details, and I let out a heavy sigh.

A political marriage!

“Alright. You go. I’ll talk to Devarsa about it.” Once she left, I stepped out for some air. I looked at the sky, as dark as my perplexed mind at the moment. My stomach suddenly rumbled. It was almost dinnertime, so I called for an attendee to ask about Ranaji's whereabouts.

“Ranisa, Ranaji is having dinner with Prince Ranvijay and Prince Agastya. He told me to inform you.” I nodded, and, bowing, he left.

After dinner in my chamber, I removed all my jewellery and moved to the courtyard. Lying the mattress on the floor, I lay down after a long day.

I distractedly played with the end of my braid, reflecting on the events of the past few days, gazing at the stars shining brightly, like hope in the night sky. After much tossing and turning, I finally dozed off and fell asleep.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, I felt a hand draped around my waist from behind. Even though I was half-asleep, I could recognize his scent. I turned to face him and rested my head on his chest. His warmth was much more effective than what I got from the quilt. I felt him stroking my head and soon fell asleep again.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The following day, I woke up late, with harsh sun rays seeping into my eyes. Sighing in annoyance, I opened my eyes as the bright light shattered my trance of sleep.

I turned around to find an empty space, with only his kurta lying on the floor beside me.

Sitting up, I pinned my hair in a bun and held the kurta close to my chest. Bringing it near my nose, I took a deep sniff. His natural, musky, and warm scent wafted into my mind and stirred my emotions. I could feel him through it.

I sighed, relaxedly, a slight smile etched on my face.

Standing up, I went to the bathroom to freshen up. Once I was refreshed, I walked out before taking a bath. I stopped an attendee and asked, “Where is Ranaji?”

“He is in the practice room, doing his morning workout, Ranisa,” she said. I bit my lower lip to contain the wicked smile that was about to appear on my face.

Working out? Interesting!

Time to execute Agastya’s plan.

Turning on my heels, I paraded towards the practice room, and the moment I stepped in, I found him swinging a wooden club.

Taking a deep breath, I moved toward him. As I walked closer, his movements became awkward, and he paused his exercise, looking at me with his brows knitted together.

He scrutinised me for several moments before stepping back and continuing his exercise. I edged closer to him, and agitated, he set the wooden club down.

Sighing, he positioned himself prone on the floor and began doing push-ups. My treacherous eyes scanned his half-naked body, lathered in sweat.

I mindlessly stared at his veins bulging out as his arms bent, the muscles of his back flexing as he pushed his body up and down.

Looking at his finely built body, a perverted thought of scratching his back while making love to him flashed through my mind. I immediately shook my head, waving that thought away, and sat beside him on the floor.

Lying down, I slipped under him from the side, our gaze met, looking directly into each other’s eyes. His face kept grazing mine every time he lowered himself for another push-up.

“You know, you shouldn't strain yourself so much until you're completely healed,” I said, and he just kept doing what he was doing. Shamelessly coiling my arms around his neck, I mumbled, “You look so hot while working out, Rudra.”

Inhaling a deep breath, he got off me and shifted a little away, continuing his push-ups. I stood up and went near him.

“You know, Rudra. As a kid, I would sit on my father’s back every time he did push-ups. It used to be so much fun,” I said, but he ignored me again. Adjusting my dupatta and lehenga, I added, “Let's see if you can deal with this.” I mounted on his back, crossed my legs, and sat comfortably.

When he began the exercise with me on his back, I burst into a fit of laughter. “Oh my god!” I laughed harder, recalling my childhood.

“I don't think you weigh more than a bird,” He remarked, and I roared with even more mirth.

“Really!?” He carried on doing it, and suddenly my laughter died.

I gulped, looking at his nape, which was turning sweaty. Leaning over, I lay on my stomach over his back and wound my arms around his shoulder. Closing my eyes, I kept my face at the back of his left shoulder and hugged him from behind.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly, and I opened my eyes. “I’m just missing my family,” I replied. With every move, the front of my body could feel the contraction in the muscles of his bare back.

“Are you still angry with me?” I questioned in a low voice.

He was panting from the intense workout and replied, “Yes, I have every right to be angry and upset with my little liar.”

I sighed and said, “Of course you do. But you should, at least, listen to my explanation for once, Rudra,” He was still exerting himself, stretching his body up and down.

“What's wrong is wrong. There is no explanation,” He responded, and I lifted my face and pressed my chin against his shoulder.

“Exactly. What’s wrong will always be wrong. And you wronged me in front of everyone. The letter you left behind has tarnished my dignity in the eyes of others. But even after I brought disgrace to my family, my parents listened to me and prioritised my happiness. They chose to be by my side. I wanted to know if you truly cared about me, if your love for me was merely materialistic, or if you loved me unconditionally, like my parents. And it worked, it worked, Rudra. The moment you said that such things don’t matter to you, my esteem for you has grown.” I said. He did not say anything, going on with his exercise.

Suddenly, an authoritative voice caught my ear. “What are you doing?”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I looked at Maasimaa standing at the doorways.

The sudden intrusion into our moment caught Nandani off guard, and startled, she lost her balance. In an instant, I turned to place my hand under her head to prevent her from falling and held her in my arms as she was about to fall to her side.

My heartbeats palpitated, not because Maasimaa was watching us in that state, but because Nandani could've gotten hurt. I scanned her frightened face and whole form, examining for any injury.

"Are you okay?" I inquired right away. She gulped visibly, and blinking, she nodded lightly.

"What do you mean, if she is okay or not?" Maasi maa asked in a firm tone. I stood up and offered my hand to her. She stood up holding my hand, and I looked at Maasi maa walking near us, saying,

"She must know how to behave with a king," she said politely but sternly. I didn't know why, but that stung me.

"What wrong did she do, Maasimaa?" I asked in a low tone. Nandani adjusted her clothes and hair, and I saw Maasimaa smile at us.

"You both are a king and queen now. Your time is an asset to this empire's people. Rather than spending it on your joys, you should use it to prosper our kingdom. And, let me remind you, Rudra, what your mother wanted for you. She wanted you to be a dutiful king, someone for whom nothing comes over the people and their welfare, even if it costs you your happiness," she said, and I gulped, unable to agree with it anymore.

"But, Maasi maa, what's wrong with Nandani's behaviour? And I don't understand how spending some quality time with my wife is hampering my duties towards my kingdom," I questioned, and she frowned at me, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Oh well, if his majesty doesn't see a problem in it, then it might not be wrong because it's pretty clear it is already right in your eyes. And now, any explanation or suggestion wouldn't matter because you already have an opinion. So yes, it's not wrong," she said. My justification clearly hurt her.

I inhaled a deep breath. "No, Maasi maa, that's not what I meant. You know me better than I do, and please don't address me so formally. You're like my mother and will always be, and I'll always be your Rudra," I said. My voice wavered by the end because of overwhelming emotions, because I couldn't ever see her hurt.

"I think I should leave now," Nandani interjected and left the room silently.

“Rudra, you remember what Guruji said, right?” she began after Nandani left.

“I do, Maasimaa, and I’m trying my best not to let Guruji’s words turn into reality.” She lowered her gaze.

“You know me, Rudra. I don’t have children, and I have dedicated my entire life to raising you three. When Surgami Dev threw you three out of the Kingdom after your mother's demise, I took you under my shelter, worked tirelessly, day and night, to fulfil the responsibility of fostering you. And, it’s no secret what kind of work I used to do to earn. I did everything so I could bring food to all your plates. Just imagining you three falling back into the same pit of misery, it’s worse than a nightmare for me.” She grew emotional; tears welled up in her eyes.

“I have no problem with her, but trust me, these people… these people of Mahabaleshgarh are so self-centred. Her father used me like an object, doing whatever he wanted to do to me, and I bore all of it with a stiff lip. But when he found Abhishree, Nandani's mother, he expelled me like a fly out of milk without compunction. I felt like I was nothing but a toy for him at that moment. I felt so envious, so insecure seeing him suddenly so close to his wife, whom he married forcibly, because he didn't want her to marry your father. In the name of love, he satiated his ego by ruining so many lives. Mine, Abhidev’s, Abhishree’s, and your father's lives. The love they ‘oh so’ proudly call divine and beautiful, that very love made them so selfish, they didn’t give two thoughts about people’s emotions and life,” she finished, her cheeks stained with tears streaming down her eyes. I stepped closer to her and hugged her.

“I know Maasi maa, I know everything. Please don't cry. I’ll never let myself fall into their trap or anyone’s. I know how hard you’ve worked for us to pamper the three of us. We are where we are now because of you. I promise I’ll never let you down,” I tried to console her, and she said.

“I know Nandani is your wife, and I have nothing against her. However, you must focus on your goal. Surgami Dev Singh and Rajvardhan are still alive. You know what you have to do,” she reminded me, and I nodded, closing my eyes.

“I know, Maasi maa,” I said, inhaling deeply.

She pulled away from the hug and said, “May God bless you with my share of happiness, too.” I smiled weakly, and she walked out of the room, patting my cheeks.

Once she left, I knelt on the floor, palming my face to contain myself.

All the memories of the time rushed over in my mind, when on nights we used to sleep on empty stomachs, the days we spent labouring so hard to afford one time’s meal. Tears blurred my vision but cleared my thoughts. Maasi maa was right. Maybe, with Nandani, I was forgetting why I had come so far. I was deviating from my goal’s track.

I felt a storm building inside me, which was making me insanely mad.

On one hand, I wanted to be with Nandani, living life and embracing happiness, but my rage, hatred, and past were driving me down the path of revenge. I sought to avenge my father's death, which led to my mother’s death and caused us three to suffer throughout our lives.

I was certain about one thing: that both options wouldn’t go hand in hand. I could either avenge my father's death or live happily with Nandani. I knew that if I killed Nandani’s father, she would never accept me back. Not killing her father meant that my revenge would remain incomplete, which meant all our suffering would have been in vain.

Rubbing my face, I raked my fingers through my hair. I was caught in an emotional maelstrom. I wanted to scream so bad, but I couldn't.

Leaving Nandani meant hurting her, which I couldn't. Not anymore. She left her everything for me, and my heart wanted her. It would've been futile if she had been at the cost of it.

With a weary sigh, I stood up and went to the bathing room in our chamber. Since we had guests present, I thought bathing in the servants’ quarters wouldn't be appropriate. Entering the dressing room, I selected my clothes.

“Ranaji,” an attendee's voice caught my attention, and I turned around to look at her. “Yes,”

“Do you want us to prepare for your bath?” She asked, and I shook my head. “No, just ensure the pool is full.”

“Yes, Ranaji, the pool is full,” she said. “Alright, thank you,” I replied, and she left from there.

I strode into the bathroom and took a quick bath.

Wearing my clothes, I went to the dressing room, where I saw Nandani standing in front of the mirror, drying her hair with the assistance of the attendees.

She gently asked them to leave when she saw my reflection in the mirror. Once all the attendees had departed, she set the ash pot on the table and approached me.

“I’m sorry, Rudra. I didn't do that deliberately. I had no clue your Maasi maa would get so upset,” she spoke in a subdued tone, fidgeting with her fingers. “I know she is someone important to you. I'm sorry, but I don’t know much about her,” she said, keeping her eyes south. I furrowed my eyebrows.

“You heard our conversation?” I asked, and she lifted her eyes, shaking her head slightly.

“I didn't mean to, but you both weren’t exactly discreet with your voices. So I just…” her lingering sentence answered for her. She was avoiding looking at me,

and her face seemed restless. When she was about to avert, I pulled her closer to me, holding her wrist. Angling her chin to make her look at me, I affirmed,

“Listen, my little eavesdropper,” I said. She blinked nervously, probably because she couldn’t handle my gaze. I caressed her cheek to ease her discomfort and, holding her shoulders, I added, “The concept of dignity and virtue has no rules or boundaries. Respect is always in the eyes of humans. For me, you’re the most morally led and dignified person, not because you’re a virgin or because you’re a princess, or because I have feelings for you, since the context of it is far beyond such social constructs. For me, dignity and purity are about how dutiful a person is, what values they hold, and how human they can be.

And, Nandani, in my eyes, you are the most righteous soul because you treat everyone equally, regardless of their social status. I agree that your ways are sometimes immature and unrealistic, but you care about people’s emotions, which is the true mark of a dignified person. Those who speak of you as undignified likely overlook your good deeds.

So never again think that you lost your dignity. Because if anyone here lost anything, that's me. I, deceiving you, made me lose my dignity and respect for myself in my own eyes. You did nothing wrong to lose something. You simply loved me, and loving someone is not an offence. You are pure and are correct, and will always be, because, unlike me, you're not selfish. You are not prioritising your own needs and desires, but others'. And if people can’t see that, the fault lies in their eyes because their societal beliefs are so inflexible and inconsiderate.

You must know that love, dignity, respect, and any form of emotion lie in the eyes of the spectator, not in the person. My Maasi maa was your father's mistress; as you heard, she had to do many such things to earn money. That made her look disrespectful, undignified, and impure on the social scale that people have created according to their convenience, but not for me. For me, she is the most respectable woman, because I see her from the perspective of a boy who just lost his mother and had no one on his side but her. You, too, should try to see her in a different light rather than questioning your dignity or purity, because you did nothing wrong, understand, little wife?” I asked, cradling her cheeks lightly. She stared at me unresponsively.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

“You get it, my little queen?” he asked, holding my face. I nodded absentmindedly.

He gently grazed my chin and muttered, “Good.” An appreciative expression etched across his face.

I peered at him concernedly, because I felt sorry for him and bad about his plight.

When I heard both of them talking, I realized that his Maasi maa wasn’t just filling him with distorted truths about my family; she held oppressive control over his thoughts, provoking and influencing him to believe how much she had struggled solely for him and his brothers.

As a person, Rudra didn't have many friends or a big family like mine. He had very few people in his life whom he respected, cared for immensely, and trusted unconditionally. Whether it was his Badi maa, his brothers, his comrades, or his beloved Maasi maa, he loved them all dearly. There was something about him that suggested he could set the whole world ablaze if anyone tried to harm these people.

His loyalty to them was so resolute and generous that it terrified me. I knew what it felt like to be destroyed by him, because I couldn’t bear even a quarter of that. But what I didn’t realize was how he would feel when he got to the bottom of the truth and uncovered the underlying intentions of his Maasimaa and father.

I suddenly snapped back when he gently grasped my neck from behind and inched closer to my face. He placed a soft, fleeting kiss on my lips and then backed away; it hardly lasted a moment.

“Hold on to this thought, little bird, the sky is your limit,” he said. I nipped my bottom lip, feeling lost in his touch. That kiss took me away for a few seconds.

“You came with me, leaving your family. I don't want you to miss them,” He said, and I nodded distractedly. I didn't know what to say, so, taking the lead, I tightly embraced him.

Leaning into his arms, I grasped his overcoat from behind and mumbled, “Rudra, I love you so much; it is beyond words. Do not ever think that you’re alone and that no one loves you. No matter what, I promise my lifetime to you and will always, always, love you.” I was flooded with emotions, and my voice wavered as I opened up about how I truly felt.

He lightly ran his finger through my damp hair and kissed me on the head. “Are you okay, Nandani?” I couldn't pin down what I was feeling, as I was experiencing a range of emotions. I tried to blink away the tears clouding my vision and nodded.

“Come here,” he said, drawing away from my hold and pulling out a chair. Settling himself with me perched on his thighs, he wrapped me in his arms,

allowing me to nuzzle my face into his neck. I closed my eyes in his soothing hold, sinking into his touch.

He wouldn't have trusted me if I had attempted to explain anything to him, and I was skeptical about how he would react to discovering the truth.

Weaving his fingers slowly into my hair, he stroked them gently and asked, “Do you want to meet your family?”

I took a deep breath and planted a kiss on the side of his neck. I did not say anything because that wasn't the cause of my dismay. I didn't know why, but something about the air had not quite settled well with me since morning.

A nagging feeling lingered in the back of my mind, bothering and discomforting me. I couldn’t shake it off. My heart wasn’t at peace; it felt like something terrible was about to happen.

Throughout the time, he kept brushing my hair quietly, moving his fingers gently in a way that calmed my insides and lulled me to sleep. Giving in to the pleasant feeling, I didn't know when I succumbed to slumber in his embrace, within his care.

I woke up on his lap with a stiff back and numb legs. Fluttering my eyelashes open, I straightened up and found him gazing at me.

Leaning forward, he placed a tender kiss on my forehead and, tucking my loose hair strands behind my ear, he muttered, “You look beautiful, little butterfly.”

I beamed instantly, observing how frequently he gave me new names. When I noticed the bright rays of the sun flooding through the windows, I abruptly rose to my feet.

“You must be getting late for the court meeting, I’m sorry,” I reminded him, realizing we had guests and that he was supposed to be in the courtroom for the meeting.

“It's alright, I spoke to Ranvijay. He is managing everything,” he said, pulling me back onto his lap. I blushed at the abrupt movement, but my brows knitted together at what he said.

“Spoke to Devarsa?” He nodded. “Spoke to him when?” I asked warily, narrowing my eyes and feeling paranoid about his answer. “When you were asleep,”

My jaw dropped in disbelief. “He was here?”

He hummed, “hnnn-hmm,” calmly playing with the loose strands of my hair, contrary to my anxious self.

“And he saw us like this?” I asked uprightly, pointing between us. He gave another nod, frustrating me.

To say I was embarrassed would be an understatement. I was mortified.

“Why didn't you wake me up? We were not in an appropriate position,” I grumbled in exasperation. “I have my hair open, I’m sitting on you. It wasn’t right,

especially in front of your younger brother," I was flustered by the whole situation and complained in a hurry, only for him to smirk.

"Everyone knows children doze off anywhere, anytime," he said.

I glared at him, slapping him on his chest, and stood up in a flash. "I'm not a child, Rudra," but he got me back. "Aww, my little angry bird," He teased, pinching my cheek.

"Stop giving me these stupid names," I gritted. However, he sneaked his hand around me and jerked me closer.

While I struggled to get away, he leaned closer to my ear and whispered sensually, "Your hair is so beautiful. I'm undoubtedly going to play with them while making love to you, little seductress." A gasp slipped off my mouth, making me shiver visibly when I processed his words.

He nibbled on my earlobe, sucking it softly, igniting a passion so deep within me. A moan was about to escape my lips as I felt the sensation of his warm and wet tongue against my skin, but when he suddenly bit down on my sensitive spot, I hissed at the bittersweet ache.

"You still feel me there, my little death-note." Suddenly, the memory of that night clouded my mind in the blink of an eye. My lashes fluttered heavily, feeling the area between my legs pulsating, spreading the heat throughout my being.

I took a moment to calm myself and muttered in a low tone, "Ranaji, please, get back to your work."

I slowly pushed him against the chair's backrest, and he smiled at me, saying, "You're glowing." He stared at me with an intensity that made me breathless, and I closed my eyes to keep my sanity intact.

"Ranaji, there's something I want to talk to you about," I spoke in a stern voice to convey the seriousness.

"I'm all ears, Ranisa," He said, holding my hand.

"Ranvijay agreed to a political marriage?" I asked.

Sitting upright, he lowered his eyes in gloom and interpreted the situation. "Yes, I was going to negotiate, but he agreed,"

I scrunched my brows in doubt. "But why does the king of Songarh want to establish a political alliance with Ranvijay? What benefit does he get from this?" I asked.

He intertwined our fingers and kissed the back of my hand. "You see, Nandani, a king is not the only title and personality who rules over a kingdom," he said. "He is a representative of a group of people who work together to implement good governance in the kingdom. Ranvijay, Agastya, you and a few other courtiers are the pillars of this group. An alliance with any of these pillars benefits the king and the kingdom in terms of finance, security and support.

And Ranvijay, being a skilled scholar in economics, law, and social welfare, has positively influenced the foundation of my rule in Suryagarh. Being the father of

seven daughters, the King of Songarh suggested marrying off one of his daughters to Ranvijay to strengthen the relationships with Suryagarh," He explained, and I nodded.

"But what about him? Is he happy? He agreed to marry her, but he hadn't met her. What if it doesn't work?" I said, and he pursed his lips, playing with our intertwined fingers.

He traced my palm with his fingers, creating invisible figures, and mumbled, "That's what I am worried about, too. Even though he is very compassionate, he speaks less, is not very good at showing his emotions, and expects nothing from people. I just want him to be happy," he said, and I couldn't agree more.

"Of course. Why don't we arrange a meeting to let them talk to each other?" I suggested, and he shook his head.

"That's not how political alliances work, my little mediator. There are no such conveniences in diplomatic wedlocks. It's all on paper, like a transaction, a promise in words to seal a marriage between two people. And only after the marriage are the bride and the groom allowed to see each other, not before the wedding," he described, tugging playfully at my cheeks.

"Oh yes! I just recalled it. My mother told me about this long ago:" His face stiffened at the mention of my mother, and he fisted his hands.

"Yes, because her hand in marriage, too, was a promise made by her brother to my father for political gains," he said in a firm tone. I gulped, understanding why he was so easily affected whenever it concerned his father.

"But, Rudra, try to understand it from a girl's perspective. She was merely twenty, and your father was in his forties when they were promised. She had no clue about it." He closed his eyes and took deep breaths.

The silence lingering in the air was deafening, creating a thick, invisible fog of tension between us.

Breaking the silence, he spoke in a suppressed tone to contain his fury, "And that's exactly where everything went wrong. A political alliance is a promise that you have to keep. Once it's made, it's made. Such promises cannot be broken. No matter the age,"

I was truly agitated by how he tried to justify the whole situation on the grounds of his principles.

Inhaling sharply, I questioned him in a low tone, "So why didn't you let me marry your uncle? That alliance, too, was a promise I had to keep. I wanted to sign a peace treaty with Suryagarh through our marriage." As soon as I finished, he angrily clamped my nape and pulled me closer to him.

Keeping my head high, I looked into his eyes and added, "You've done exactly what my father did to save my mother. If you believe your actions can be justified, then I'm sorry to break it to you that what my father did was right too,"

He had his eyes shut, his jaw set firmly, and even though he was fuming, he made every effort to refrain from lashing out.

“I loved you,” He seethed, glaring daggers into my eyes, and I replied instantly, “My father loves my mother too. And let’s not overlook the fact that your father already had fifteen wives. He just wanted one more to warm his bed.”

His grip tightened around my neck. “Hold your tongue, Nandani,” He warned me in a dangerously low tone. “They all too were perhaps political marriages,” He said, earning a chuckle from me.

“Your father must be a skilled player of politics. Why don't you, too, marry a hundred women in the name of politics like your father,” I snarled at him, and his clasp turned painfully tight on my nape.

“Don't you dare say another word, Nandani?”

I lowered my eyes at his threatening tone. “I’m sorry, but what's wrong is wrong,” I muttered, “Your father treated women as objects, saw them as symbols of royalty and a source of pleasure. I pity you because your beliefs fluctuate so easily. Every time it comes to me and my family, you become so inconsiderate and cruel, but when it’s about your father, you turn so reflective and sensitive,” I confronted him. He pulled exceptionally close, his breath fanning my face. I struggled to breathe in his hold, yet he stared at me blankly.

“Why don't you understand? You’re special to me, Nandani,” he said, placing his forehead on mine. A lone tear slipped down my cheek.

“Every woman is special, Rudra.” My voice wavered with intense emotion.

He moved back, and I looked at his stoic face. He stared deeply into my eyes, yet his silence revealed the anger that was burning inside him.

With the intention of talking, I was about to speak, “Rudra, your fath—”

“Enough!” but he cut me off mid-sentence. He lifted me off his lap, got to his feet, and darted out of the room. I stood there, staring at his back, watching him walk away once more.

My heart throbbed quickly in my chest, urging me to call out for him, but my mind contradicted me.

It was an internal clash between my heart and my mind. The rational part of me felt distressed, angry, and justified. My heart, however, wanted to be kind to him, understand him, and, most importantly, stand by his side.

I was overwhelmed by a wave of emotions, struggling against its turmoil, and it felt extremely turbulent. Blinking back my tears, I swallowed the hard lump of sadness and looked at myself in the mirror.

Why was everything so complicated? Could it get worse? When would he realize that he was trusting the wrong people?

Sighing tiredly, I braided my hair and adorned myself with some jewelry. Once done, I went to the guest chamber and called for Suman and Reva.

All the attendants gathered at my call, and I asked, “Have the preparations for the guests’ lunch started?”

Reva curtly bobbed her head. “Ji, Ranisa,”

“And are all the guests’ chambers cleaned?” She nodded again. “Ji, Ranisa,”

“Good,” I muttered and directed my focus to Suman. “Suman, notify Ranaji that drafts of amendments are kept in the library for him to review. Kindly tell him he must review those documents for finalization once he’s wrapped up his work. And don’t forget to inquire if there’s any news from our secret agent,”

Listening to my every instruction, she nodded, and I added, “And yes, let Prince Agastya know I want to meet him when he’s free.” Once I had briefed her on all the details, she took her leave.

Later in the morning, I took a walk around the palace, and while exploring, I considered visiting the town on the outskirts of the palace.

Specific standards were established for commoners joining the royal army and palace staff. Until they met the criteria, their stay was subsidized by the royal treasury.

But I was aghast to find no soul wandering around the town, not a single person in sight. Let alone people, the land was so barren that no trees or birds flew around. It felt as though the town had been abandoned for decades.

“Bhabhisa!” I was startled at the voice and immediately turned to find Agastya standing behind me.

“Devarsa, you scared me in the daylight,” I breathed heavily, keeping my hand on my chest to calm myself.

“Aap yahaan kya kar rahin hain?” (What are you doing here?) He inquired, and I turned back to observe my surroundings.

The dead, leafless trees, the ruined quarters, the creeping silence around, as if it were left never to be occupied again.

“Hum yaahan aas paas ke kshetra ka nireekshan karne aaye the. Kintu yahaan to koi bhi nahi hai. Kya Suryagarh mein koi aisa nahi jisko raj gharaane se sahaayata ki Aawashyakta hai?” (I paid a visit here to inspect the area around. But there’s no one here. Is there no one in Suryagarh who needs support from the royal privileges?) I asked.

He turned around, folding his hands behind him and raking his eyes around the vast land.

Taking a deep breath, he looked back at me and said, ***“Bhabhisa, Suryagarh ki cchavi maatra dekhne mein vishal va sundar hai. Iski bhavyata aur iska prataap to Daadosa ke shaasan kaal mein ucch tha, unnati ki pad par tha. Kintu jabse Tausa ne rajgaddi sambhaali, iska tej aur gaurav dhundhla ho gaya. Suryagarh ki praja ko to ab na raj gharaane par vishwaas na hi Raja par,”*** (Bhabhisa, Suryagarh’s image as a beautiful, gigantic empire is just a facade. Its grandeur and glory were at their peak during the reign of our grandfather and were on the path of

advancement. But since Uncle took over the throne, its magnificence and pride began fading away. People of our kingdom have no faith in the royal family or the king anymore.)

“But this is not right. Our people need us. The king needs his subjects. Can anyone tell us anything about what’s happening with our people?” I asked, and he shook his head sadly.

“Bhabhisa, it hasn’t even been a week since Bhaisa took over the kingdom. A new reign system in the empire implies facing challenges, specifically, challenges in terms of finance and security. For now, the matter of greatest importance is to prepare ourselves, strengthen our roots, refill the royal treasury, increase our wealth, and, most importantly, ensure the royal army is completely on our side. Only then will we be able to support our subjects,” he clarified in detail.

“Are we out of wealth?” I immediately asked.

He pursed his lips, looking at the ground. “We are, indeed. In the uncle’s reign, he added solely to his comforts, while the nobles surrounding him stacked their coffers. But since we now have complete dominion over the royal treasury, the assessment of available resources has begun.

Coins, jewellery, gemstones, and artifacts have all been enumerated under Bhai sa’s guidance, and detailed records have been kept. However, the counting of tax collections from previous decades, revenue from agriculture and land, and overall wealth is still underway. We are yet to find a new income stream, which will only be possible when we have a complete overview of our resources. Only after this will we be able to outline a new construction plan for Suryagarh’s territory,” He elaborated. I nodded, comprehending the whole situation.

Yet, a part of me remained unconvinced. I was eager to learn about people’s conditions without further delay. Knowing that the evaluation of assets, the plans, and everything else would definitely take time, I wanted to understand under what circumstances the people of Suryagarh were living, what they were experiencing, and where they were located.

“But I want to meet people,” I said, and he looked at me, confused. “I mean, this is necessary. What if they are in some dire situation? What if the women need our help? What if something cruel is happening to them and we don’t know about it?” I tried to describe the possibilities, and he nodded in agreement.

“Yes, you might be right, Bhabhisa. But Bhaisa will never allow it,” He said.

“Why? Doesn’t being a queen and a prince give us the authority to make such decisions?” I questioned, and he nodded curtly.

“Bhabhisa, it's only been a week since Bhaisa took over, and that was through a revolt. Many soldiers were martyred, resulting in so many families losing their loved ones. People might be infuriated with us,”

“Yes!” I shook my head in urgency. “Yes, that’s exactly why our people need us. We have to reconstruct the outskirts of the Kingdom as soon as possible and

relocate the people who are below the poverty line and need our immediate support,”

He inhaled a sharp breath and countered, “Bhabhisa, we don’t have as many resources, and in addition to that, we cannot expect people to trust us so quickly. Gaining people’s rapport is a gradual process.”

“And so, it is necessary to interact with people to build that trust,” I spoke with an insistent tone. “The subjects can only trust the royals if they have consistent communication flowing between them. The more we delay, the bigger the cracks get,” I said.

“Bhaisa will never allow it,” he stated, and I replied, “So don’t tell him.”

He was taken aback. Gaping at me with wide eyes, his mouth slightly open yet closed, he seemed to want to say something but couldn't.

“No, he’ll get so angry,” he finally voiced after a calculated pause.

I folded my hands in front of me and said, “He’s always angry. And, I cannot stop myself from performing my duties just because he’ll get angry."

He took a step back and uttered in a serious tone, “This is a risky attempt. You know, people might get angry at us,”

I shook my head, trying to assure him. “I’ll talk to them. I’m sure they will listen to me,”

“People, like the old king, are just waiting for an opportunity to get back at us. If this news gets to our enemies, Bhaisa would be done for,” He said, and I took a step forward.

“So you accompany me,” he stumbled back, covering his mouth and shaking his head in absolute terror. “Bhaisa will kill me.” He said.

Narrowing my eyes, I scrutinised him up and down, with my hands on my hips. “Devarsa, are you a kid?” His jaw hung open, and he scoffed at me in displeasure.

“Bhabhisa, I’m taller and healthier than you. In what sense do I seem like a kid to you?” He tried to maintain his gait, but failed miserably, the way he complained, moving his hands up and down to flaunt his physique. I could notice that slight tinge of aggression on his face.

“So why are you scared of Rudra?” I said, and he immediately looked at me in utter shock. “Rudra?”

I immediately turned away, slapping my mouth. “Ranaji,” I turned back to him and corrected myself, laughing nervously. He knitted his brows together, examining me.

“Aisa prateet hota hai ki bhaisa ne aapko tanik adhik hi choot de rakhi hai,” (My brother seems to have given you too much liberty). He said. I smirked, folding my arms over my chest.

“Kyun? Aap apni patni ko aisi swatantrata nahi denge?” (Why? Wouldn't you give your wife such liberties?) I asked, and he shook his head.

“Kabhi nahi. Humaari patni ko humein sammaan se bulaana hoga, sabhya vyavahaar rakhna hoga, aur jo hum jo kahenge wo sab karna hoga,” (Never. My wife will have to address me with respect, behave decently and do everything I say). The way he spoke with so much pride, I tried, I honestly did, but I just couldn't. I immediately burst into fits of laughter, and he glared at me sharply, which caused me to laugh even louder, clutching my stomach.

“Hahaha… Devarsa aise to aapko koi kanya milne se rahi,” (With such demands, I’m afraid you'll never get a wife). I said. He dramatically mocked how I laughed, and I immediately shut my mouth. “I’m sorry, Devarsa,”

Flaring his nostrils at me, he said, “I’ll complain to my brother to punish you for laughing at me.”

I smiled and replied, “You can complain all you want, but for now, please agree to tour the village with me.” He crossed his arms over his chest, looking at me shrewdly.

“You want me to cut my head and serve it to you on a silver platter?” He asked dramatically, and I nodded. After a pregnant pause, he finally agreed, “Ok!” And I beamed happily. “But…”

I shut my mouth, fluttering my eyes anxiously, waiting for him to finish. “... you'll have to do something for me in return,” I creased my brows together, and he moved slightly closer. You’ll have to help me make someone jealous,” he whispered discreetly, and I immediately looked at him.

“Who?” I questioned.

He smirked and answered in a very low voice. “There’s a girl,”

My mouth hung open with the news. “A girl?” I asked, and he nodded.

“And may I know who this unfortunate one is?” I questioned, to tease him. He looked at me blankly, and I chuckled. “Alright, I was just messing with you. Tell me, who’s this lucky girl?”

He smiled and, taking a deep breath, said, “I’ll tell you when the time is right. But for now, do you agree?” he asked.

“So now you want me to cut my head and serve it back to you on a silver platter in return? Because Ranaji will kill me for sure,” I said, and he smiled at me evilly.

“Now that's how deals work, Bhabhisa,”

I sighed and said, “Okay, done!”

“Great! So we’ll leave when the guests and Bhaisa will be busy with the noon meal,” He said, and I nodded. “Good idea,”

But suddenly, I remembered something and immediately clarified my doubt: “Oh yes, will we go on horseback, or should I go in a palanquin?”

He grinned at me widely, smacking his palms together and said, “Bhabhisa, there is this new thing in the market, it’s super comfortable and fast, and will help us manage our weight too. It's like two sticks,” I gaped at him in wonder. *Why wasn’t I introduced to such conveniences?* I thought.

“Really?! Do we have such a thing in Suryagarh?” I asked, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Yesssssss! We all have it...legs,” he said in an unusually high-pitched voice, showing off his legs, and I blinked at him irritably.

Sighing, he flashed a smile and retorted, “We’ll go on foot, Bhabhisa. It is safe and will help us keep our identities hidden,” I nodded in understanding.

“And that brings us to a new problem. How will we hide our true identities?” I asked, and he illustrated the plan, “Well, just make sure no one recognises us while we leave the palace, while wandering in the village, and finally, when we return. There’s a strict security check at the main entrance following the arrival of guests in our palace. Every person walking in and leaving is inspected in advance.”

“Okay! I’ll take care of it,” I said, and he added, “Now, we must leave. There isn’t much time left for lunch. I’ll meet you outside your chamber in some time,” he said. I nodded.

“Okay, see you later.” Parting our ways, I came back to the palace and ambled straight to my chamber with a pounding heart, because I kept thinking of the adventure we were about to get on. My plan was to make sure no one saw me leaving the chamber.

As soon as I reached the bedroom, I called for Suman. Walking in, she asked, “Yes, Nandani,”

Going near her, I asked, “Can I borrow another pair of your clothes?” She furrowed her brows concernedly.

“What? Why?” she asked, and I replied, “Just lend me a pair.” She nodded, narrowing her eyes at me, then left to bring her clothes.

She returned with a simple grey and red lehenga. Taking it from her hands, I rushed into the dressing room and quickly removed all the jewellery. After changing into the clothes, I came out and found Suman’s sceptical gaze fixed on me.

“Are you going somewhere?” she asked cautiously, raising her eyebrows. The thought of her rambling the whole truth to Ranaji if he asked crossed my mind.

“No,” I blurted out. “The weather’s so humid today. I was feeling suffocated in my clothes,” I sputtered, and she looked at me sharply.

“Nandani, don’t even try. What are you going to do? Tell me the truth,” she said, and I took a deep breath, trying to conceal my embarrassment.

“I’m just thinking of surprising Ranaji,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut, hoping she would buy it.

When I opened my eyes, I looked at her lips, stretched into the widest of smiles. As I walked closer, she gushed, holding my hands, “Wow! Really? Is it some kind of fantasy, like making out in a cottage or in the middle of a forest?” And there it was—I felt like someone had stabbed me and pierced my heart.

My husband was practising celibacy for ten years, for god's sake. He couldn't even jerk off, and this girl was talking to me about fantasies. Seriously?

“Yes,” I had to force a smile to stop her from asking more questions. Blushing at my answer, she said, “I’d love to know the details.” And I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Why not? I’ll write a book on it,” I said, and her face fell a little at my comment.

“Okay, if anyone asks where I am, just say you don’t know,” I explained, and she nodded, perplexed. I walked past her and called Reva.

“Ji, Ranisa,” she acknowledged, standing before me. “Where is Ranaji?” I asked, and she answered, “I think he just left for the dining room with all the guests for lunch.” I nodded.

“Okay, thank you!”

Once she left, I covered my head with the dupatta and hurried out of the chamber.

A few steps away from the chamber, in a corner and out of sight, my gaze fell on a man wearing a dhoti and a plain red kurta, with a turban wrapped around his head and a moustache above his lips. I carefully observed the individual.

Tall, and green eyes—Agastya. I sprinted in his direction as soon as I recognised him.

“Shall we go now?” I asked, standing beside him, keeping my tone down.

He nodded. “Yes. If anyone asks, just say we’re husband and wife and that we are leaving to meet my ill Guruji,” he said, earning a chuckle from me.

“Ranaji will kill you if he knows that you sickened his Guruji,” I remarked, and he immediately looked at me. “Bhabhisa, volume,” he muttered, and I shut my mouth in an instant. Then he gestured with his hand, saying, “Come on.”

We silently walked towards the main entrance and stood in the queue, like everyone else leaving the palace. I could see guards investigating people through the blurred view of my cotton veil.

We remained still, holding our breaths, waiting for our turn. When guards began checking on Agastya, my heart hammered against my chest.

“What is your name?” One of them asked, and he answered in a completely altered voice, “Sooraj,”

The guard further asked, “And who is she?” I gulped, waiting for his response. “My wife, Kalavati,” he said, and I lowered my dupatta even more.

I didn't know why, but suddenly my cheeks turned warm, and my heartbeat was almost audible to my ears.

“And where are you going?” My whole body shuddered the moment I heard his voice.

What the hell is he doing here? My insides screamed.

Through my dupatta, I could see half of his body, up to his midriff, standing in front of us in his overcoat. My fingers trembled insanely as I fidgeted with the hem of my dupatta.

I just wanted the earth to swallow me whole.

“Pranam Ranaji! We’re going to our village. My Guruji is no more, so…” Agastya replied in such a sorrowful tone, as if what he was saying weren’t lies.

What a master of drama.

“Oh, that’s so sad,” He said, and looked at the guards. “Let them go,” I heaved out a sigh of peace, and Agastya retorted, joining his palms,

“Thank you, thank you, Ranaji.” He walked toward the main gates, and I followed him quietly. However, as soon as I took my next few steps, I heard the sound of my anklets’ bells.

Hey bhagwaan!!!

I mentally smacked my forehead. Why, God, why? Why was I so foolish to forget to remove my anklets?

My fingers shivered in fear, and if I had stopped, he would’ve sensed that something was suspicious.

And so I chose to keep walking, fisting my palms, when suddenly, “Wait!” He enunciated firmly, and my whole body visibly shook at his tone.

Dead, you're dead, Nandani! My insides shrieked in terror, and my knees weakened at the very thought that he probably recognised us.

“Keep going,” Agastya mumbled under his breath, and we both kept walking at a normal pace, even though our bodies were quivering in fright.

“I said, wait!”

Sweat beaded on my forehead, running down the side of my face. With wobbly lips, I breathed, “Should we escape?” Heat raced up my cheeks when I heard his heavy footsteps striding closer.

Suddenly, Agastya turned back and approached him, with his palms adjoined, ***“Kshama kijiyega Ranaji, kintu humse koi bhool hui hai kya?”*** (Apologies, your majesty, but have we done something wrong?) It was audacious of him to ask that question, in an oh so courteous tone.

But when I turned around, I didn't find Agastya standing near Rudra; instead, I found him on his knees at Rudra’s feet. My mouth hung open when I saw him clinging to Rudra’s legs, feigning tears, as if he were wailing for his dear life, and what flabbergasted me was his acting, which seemed absolutely real.

I glanced up at him fearfully. His hands were folded over his chest, and anger was evident on his face. Suddenly, twisting Agastya’s ear, he raised him to his feet and grabbed him by his nape tightly, pulling him closer.

“She is your wife?” He emphasized ‘your wife’ in an anguished tone, and I looked at Agastya’s petrified face.

He frantically shook his head in denial and quavered anxiously, “No, no, no, Bhaisa. It was her idea,” He pointed his finger in my direction, and I looked down. *That was it. I'm done.*

“What idea?” He asked, frowning at him. I could feel his eyes on me.

“And you, go back to your chamber and wait for me,” he said, snapping his fingers at me, and an instant wave of fury washed over me. I immediately lifted my veil and questioned,

“Why?” he looked at me angrily and yelled, “What, why?” Inhaling a deep breath, I braced myself and said, “I want to go out with Devarsa.” he glowered at me intensely.

“What did you say?” he asked, looking at Agastya. “What were you two planning? And how dare you call my wife yours?” And there, I could say he was jealous.

Agastya shook his head, appearing fearful. “Bhaisa, she bribed me to do so. She wanted to go out, but I warned her that it was a terrible, terrible idea.” He updated him on the information.

I exhaled sharply. “Really, Agastya? Didn't we have a deal?” I asked, and Rudra directed his attention to me.

“What deal?” Seizing the opportunity, Agastya sneakily slipped away from his hold, slowly retreating his steps. He fled. Rudra tried to catch him, but he was fast enough to escape. I just stood there, blankly, not knowing what to do.

“You, come with me, little troublemaker.” He dragged me along by my wrist.

“Ranaji, I want to go out,” but he paid no heed to my pleas, which riled me up.

As soon as we reached our bedroom, he went ballistic and snapped at me in a thunderous voice, “What the hell were you trying to do?” His assertive behavior was getting on my nerves.

“I want to go out,” I spat back and headed for the door, making an effort to leave, but he forcibly yanked me back, crashing me against his chest, and locked the door. Hovering over me, he clamped onto my neck, hindering my breathing.

“How dare you?” He growled, but I immediately pushed him away with all my force, gasping for air.

“NO, HOW DARE YOU?” I roared back at him with equal fervour. He stepped forward and, holding my wrists, he twisted my arm behind me.

“Anger. Down. Now,” He spoke, gnashing his teeth.

With the same intensity in my voice and eyes, I looked at him straight and gritted, “Leave. My. Hand. Now,”

Clenching his jaw firmly, he, in a rage, held my jaw with his other hand in a rugged grip. “How dare you let him call you your wife?” he asked, his eyes glowering with an ire so fervent. Yet, taking the chance, I bit down hard on his thumb, close to my lips.

He hissed at the sudden move and sucked on his thumb to soothe the pain.

“Leave me,” I struggled to get away, but he tightened his hold on my wrist. He was hurting me, making me sob. I couldn’t take it anymore, because his grasp almost crushed my wrist, and so, inhaling a deep breath, I expressed my agony in a steady voice,

“You are hurting me, Rudra.” I squirmed to get loose, but he had my wrist locked in a deadly grip.

“How dare you let him call you his wife?” He asked again, his voice deeper and serious than before.

“So what if he called me his wife? Surely he’ll make a thousand times better husband than you,” I seethed, staring him in the eyes. A stoic look etched onto his expression, devoid of any emotion, and in an instant, he let go of my hand. His fingers left a crimson imprint on my wrist, and I caressed my hand to ease the ache.

A strained quiet descended into the room.

A few moments later, I looked at him, taking his steps, slowly moving closer to me. However, moving past me, he unbolted the door, and without a word, he walked out. I realised what I had said, feeling the sting of regret.

Tears blurred my vision, and my heart felt heavy with emotion, experiencing disappointment in him for walking away again and in myself for saying such things.

A sob escaped my lips as I watched him leave me behind again.

It aggravated me… it aggravated me immensely the way he walked away every time we were supposed to talk it out, that he chose not to resolve our issues by discussing them.

Why were our conversations always incomplete, hanging by the thread of ego and rage? Why was it that the love we felt couldn’t foster trust, respect, and a deeper connection between us? Why did he always choose to leave, and why did I continually prefer to stand numb, gazing at his back?

My hands balled into fists and I inhaled a heavy breath. Wiping my tears away, I turned on my heels and chose to follow him.

As I marched out, I found him in the hallway. So, going behind him, I stood before him to stop him midway.

“I’m no slave for you to drag me through the corridors down to your chamber. I’m a woman, no object. And above all, I am the queen of this empire. Hence, you must learn to treat me with respect,” I was heaving heavily while venting my anger, pointing my finger at him. But I didn't stop because he had to know, “What we do behind closed doors in our chamber is a different matter, but I'll never tolerate such disrespectful behaviour again. I’m your wife, so treat me like one,” I pointed out his unruly behaviour in an unwavering and determined tone, locking eyes with him unflinchingly.

“Wife? I don't even know how many people call you their wife,” he scoffed.

Anger caught the best of me at such a derogatory remark, and I reacted by raising my hands, landing my palm right onto his cheek, and striking his face sideways with a firm slap.

“How dare you?” I rumbled at him breathlessly, and he broke into an abrupt laugh. My brows knitted together as he went ballistic, laughing scornfully.

It frightened me when I saw his eyes glistening with tears while laughing, as if he were trying to cope with his anger through it. His breathing had elevated, and his gaze became extremely cold and sharp.

He stopped laughing and bowing in front of me, and asked in a really low voice, “I apologise, Ranisa.” His tone panged my heart with a stabbing pain. I stared at him blankly when he added, “Now, if you allow me, may I please leave the quarters of your chamber?”

Your chamber? It's our chamber.

My lips wobbled when he turned around and walked away. I didn’t know why, but it felt unusual. Out of all the times he had walked away from me, this time left a different impression.

“Rudra,” I tried to call out for him with misted eyes, but my voice emerged as an inaudible breath, impossible to reach his ears or his heart, for he was eager to distance himself from me.

“Nandani,” Suddenly, Suman’s voice caught my attention, and I glanced back at her. “Hey, what happened? Why are you crying? Is everything okay?” As she held me by my shoulders. There was an urge in her voice.

I immediately hugged her and fell apart in her arms, breaking down into wails of torment. I cried and cried, letting out everything and allowing tears to flow freely down my face because it was unbearable—him not letting me go out and our fight over the same issue.

“It’s okay, it’s alright, don’t cry. What happened? Did Ranaji hurt you? Did he do something?” she asked, patting my back comfortingly, and I wept uncontrollably.

“Bhabhisa,” Suddenly, Ranvijay’s voice caught my attention, and I pulled away from Suman to look at him. Washing off my tears, I plastered a smile and greeted him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern lacing his voice, and I nodded. With an insistent look, he asked me again, “Really, Bhabhisa? If there’s anything you can tell me?”

I gave him an assuring smile and said, “Really, it’s nothing!” I spotted Agastya behind him, entering the chamber in his regular clothes.

Standing in front of us, he greeted me, “Pranaam, Bhabisa.” his sorrowful tone didn’t go unnoticed by me.

“Bhabhisa, Bhaisa has asked us to escort you wherever you want. Please let us know how long it will take for you to get ready?” Ranvijay informed me, and I frowned at him.

Rudra said so?

“Ranaji?” I asked to ensure I heard it right, and they nodded in unison.

“Ji Bhabhisa! Bhaisa agreed to let you go out, accompanied by Ranvijay Bhaisa and me, along with a group of soldiers, for your safety,” Agastya explained. I

smiled nervously, looking at the two brothers.

“Please get ready quickly, Bhabhisa. We’ll have to be back before sunset,” Ranvijay said, and I nodded.

“Please wait for me. I’ll be back,” I said, immediately rushing into the dressing room. With Suman's help, I changed into my usual clothes as soon as possible and quickly stepped outside to find Agastya and Ranvijay waiting for me. “I’m ready. Let’s go,” I said.

We all left for the palace entrance, where a unit of armed soldiers, horses, and a palanquin were waiting for us. Suman and Reva joined me, too.

Agastya and Ranvijay mounted their respective horses, and I sat in the palanquin while the convoy moved.

On our way, my thoughts kept drifting to Rudra. I wondered what made him change his decision. What was he thinking?

And there, I was missing him already. With him in my head, I didn't realise we had reached the main village. It was when Suman informed me that I stepped out of the palanquin and stood close by Agastya and Ranvijay.

“Be careful, Bhabhisa. People might get angry seeing us,” Agastya warned me, and the brothers positioned themselves on either side of me.

“Relax, Devarsa. I'll be fine,” I said and instructed the soldiers, “Just stay here and wait for us,”

“But, Bhabhisa, they’re here for your protection,” Ranvijay intervened, and I looked at him.

“Devarsa, people might get angry seeing us accompanied by armed soldiers. It is only right that all the soldiers stay back here. And about my safety, I have you both,” they nodded dubiously, and we began our parade into the village.

While promenading through the bustling lanes of the village, I watched the people indulge in their everyday chores: selling vegetables, making pottery, blacksmithing, and weaving. The air was filled with the irresistible aroma of food cooked by the vendors in their stalls. The noise of children playing, the chaos of babies’ cries, and buyers’ bargaining kept the atmosphere alive.

However, as soon as the people spotted us, the crowd shifted uneasily, and a heavy silence fell over them. The ladies, once busy sweeping the sidewalks and carrying baskets, immediately walked inside their houses and locked their doors. At the same time, the men engaged themselves in work, paying no attention to us.

The unusual tension lurking in the atmosphere made me gulp nervously. I was clueless and in a predicament. I didn't know where to begin or how to initiate a conversation with the villagers. While raking my eyes around, I caught sight of an elderly lady sitting outside a house.

That was it. Taking a deep breath, I approached her slowly.

“Pranaam,” she glanced up at me when I greeted her. She scrutinised me once before returning her gaze to the ground, clutching a bundle to her chest.

“Daadisa,” I called her softly and settled beside her on the ground. I looked at her wrinkled hands. She seemed frail, perhaps in her seventies. Her clothes were in terrible condition, torn and unkempt.

To put her at ease, I gently placed my hand on her trembling ones, sensing her discomfort when she slightly edged away from me.

“We bring no harm to you,” I said. She frowned at me, probably wondering why a royal was sitting beside her on the ground. With a sombre expression on her face, she acknowledged my presence.

“Baisa[43],” her voice quivered with tiredness as she wobbled out the words. I swallowed down the overwhelming feeling, hearing her sorrowful tone.

“Where do you live?” I asked to talk to her. She blinked at me several times, as if she were about to break down.

“Live? My son…” Her voice was hoarse as she faltered with her words. She looked distantly at nothing in particular, as if she were trying to recall something.

“Your son? Where is he? Why’re you sitting here?” I asked, and suddenly, tears streamed down her face.

“Where is my son?” she asked, looking at me. Her raspy tone broke as though she were grieving, and I concluded she had a problem.

“Did you eat anything?” I asked as she shook with emotion. She abruptly shook her head.

“Food... The crops got destroyed in the storm,” she replied, and I turned to Ranvijay and Agastya, who were standing behind me.

“Storm?” I asked.

Ranvijay squatted beside me and said, “Bhabhisa, six months ago, a huge storm hit the village.” I looked back at the lady and offered to accompany us.

“You should come with us. We’ll support you,” she shook her head in denial.

“No, no, no. My son has told me to wait for him,” she said, looking at me suspiciously. I didn't know what to say; I wasn't convinced about her son.

“We’ll let you know when he’ll be back. But where did your son go?” I questioned, and she said, “He went; the dacoits took him. He borrowed money and failed to repay. They took him, and I’ve been waiting since then,” she said, breaking into tears. Her pain triggered my tears, and I held her hands.

“Please calm down, don't worry, we’ll take care of you,” I tried to console her, but suddenly she shoved me back, causing me to lose my balance.

“Bhabhisa…” Ranvijay instantly reached out to hold me, but I stopped him immediately, balancing myself on my hands.

“I’m okay.” Even though they were both my brothers-in-law, I didn't validate any other man touching me except Rudra. Unless it was truly necessary, I wouldn’t let anyone touch me, even if it was for help.

Regaining my composure, I looked at the elderly woman again. I inhaled deeply and removed my gold bangles. I handed them to her, “Just keep them for now. Our

people will come here in two days. If your son doesn’t return by then, you’ll be coming to the palace,” I said. She narrowed her eyes, intently looking at the bangles.

After meeting her, I moved on to meet more ladies. I attempted to help every woman I encountered by donating my jewelry to those in dire need. By the end of the visit, I was left with only my toe rings, headpiece, and nose ring.

I even encountered a pregnant woman, and looking at her baby bump, I remembered that my husband was celibate and was enraged with me.

Honestly, the state of the village and the people’s condition left me astounded.

The storm devastated the peasant’s farming. The unavailability of products caused a spike in commodity prices due to low supply and increased demand, making it impossible for extremely poor people to afford anything. Additionally, dacoits looted the entire village.

The village tour made me realise that there was so much for the king and his pillars to do.

By the time we returned to the palace, the sun had already set, and it had become dark.

“Thank you so much, Devarsa,” I said, looking at my brothers-in-law.

“We’re glad we could help, Bhabhisa. This tour will help us in many ways—to form new policies and schemes for the villagers,” Ranvijay said.

“And it’ll help me maintain the finances, too,” Agastya said. “But you’ve a challenging task ahead,” I smiled weakly, and Ranvijay furrowed his brows in question.

“Is Bhaisa angry with you?” he asked, looking at us. Agastya nodded.

“Not exactly angry, but hurt. I jokingly called Bhabhisa my wife for a mission, and he went insanely mad,” Agastya answered, and Ranvijay sighed in frustration.

“What do you expect from a man who went against all odds and fought a whole Kingdom just for her? And, how dare you call her your wife? She is like our mother,” Ranvijay angrily grabbed his collar.

“It's not his fault, Devarsa,” I intervened. He looked at me and released Agastya.

“By the way, Bhabhisa, if you can’t find him anywhere, the light of the moon and the shade of the stars might help you,” he said, puzzling my mind.

“What?” I looked at him, perplexed, and he gave a soft smile.

“Well, you’ll have to figure that out,” and with that, they both took their leave.

I tried to comprehend his words when Suman’s voice reached me. “Nandani, I believe you should take a bath before dinner.” I nodded, and we both headed toward my chamber. On our way, I asked an attendee about Rudra’s whereabouts.

“Ranisa, I apologise, but we are unaware of Ranaji’s whereabouts. The last time we saw him was in the late morning,” she replied, bowing her head. I nodded, dismissing her.

I kept replaying in my head where he might be. It wasn’t that I was missing him, but I… I just had a few matters to discuss with him.

After taking a quick bath and changing into my nightgown, I ambled out to find my dinner already served on the table. Even though I wished to have dinner with my dearest husband, my stomach rumbled with hunger. Giving up on waiting for him, I sat down to eat.

My mind was in a state of turmoil.

I didn’t want to pursue him any longer. There was no point in doing so if our feelings weren’t mutual. I agree that he opened up to me about his feelings and expressed his love for me in words, but somehow it didn't seem sufficient since actions speak louder than words. Moreover, his actions were often contradictory to his words.

There were a few of his habits that I entirely detested. First and foremost, the way he always grabbed me by my neck in rage. And to add to that, he unintentionally and unnecessarily disrespected me. I loved him, no doubt, but not at the cost of my self-respect.

When I married him, I didn't consider my self-respect because my love was more important than anything at that time. But now, as his wife and a queen, I wanted him to treat me well. It is not wrong to expect respect from the one we love dearly and who claims to love us.

He said he loved me, but his actions weren’t exactly what I would call love. The way he dragged me all the way from the palace’s entrance to our chamber hurt me, and that was not love. And, the way he accused me of how many men call me their wife was the final blow.

I lost it right there.

Never in my life have I trusted any man or allowed any man to even lay his eyes on me, let alone touch me, not even a friend, except for my family.

I accept that what I did before our marriage was an impulsive decision. It wasn’t something an ideal princess was supposed to do, but that did not mean I wasn't loyal, and that definitely did not mean he could question my character.

While having dinner, I kept pondering his behavior. One part of me was adamant about not talking to him, but the other part was desperate to see if he was okay.

However, the sensible part of me won. As a queen, I had matters to discuss with him that required our immediate attention.

By the time I finished eating and washed my hands, the night had grown darker, and it was time to sleep. So, I went to the courtyard to check for him, but strangely, he wasn't there.

Furrowing my brows, I bit my lower lip, wondering where he could be. Suddenly, the thought of him being in the library crossed my mind.

Turning on my heels, I picked up a hand lantern and sauntered towards the library. The bells of my anklets resonated through the path, as everyone had

already gone to bed.

I stopped in front of the library door, and after inhaling deeply, I pushed it open. The creaking noise of the heavy doors echoed through the empty hallways, causing my heart to race slightly.

Clenching the fabric of my gown, I stepped inside, where the warm caress of inviting candlelight and the lingering fragrance of oud and sandalwood greeted me. As I walked further in, I saw him sitting in the chair. The dim, golden light flickered across his face as he leaned over the table, reading some papers.

Slowly placing the lantern on the table nearby, I cleared my throat to make my presence known, although my anklets must've already done so. I patiently waited for his reaction for a few moments, but it was like he didn't hear me, or perhaps he heard me, but turned a deaf ear.

A sudden wave of cold anxiety washed over me. My fingers twitched as I realised he was still mad at me.

Standing just a few feet away, I swallowed nervously and called him softly, ***"Suniye,"*** (Listen.)

"Ji, Ranisa, kahiye, kaisa seva karein hum aapki?" (Yes, your majesty, how may I help you?) The outright formality in his tone made me flinch. I hesitated for a brief moment to utter anything.

Biting on my lower lip, I said, "I came to speak of the drafts I prepared for the renovations needed in the servants' quarters." My eyes landed on the very papers on the edge of my side of the table.

"Yes, Ranisa, don't worry. I have already approved of them," He briefed me in, his voice steady and polite, but distant.

Stepping further in, I added, "And there's something I want to talk to you about."

"You have my undivided attention," his words, yet his eyes were unwavering on the papers. I couldn't read his expressions or tell what he was feeling. I didn't know if he was angry or uninterested, or indeed busy. And that made my blood run cold. Taking a deep breath, I reported the village visit to him.

"While on my tour to the village, I encountered many people who needed our immediate attention. There are complaints of dacoits raiding the village often. And the storm that hit the land a few months ago left nothing for the people, even in the name of hope. It caused an immense decline in the economy and has adversely affected the people," The room hung in heavy silence, and the sound of him flipping the pages made me acutely aware.

"Rest assured, your majesty, we will soon start working on reconstructing the outskirts of the palace. I have already appointed a unit of soldiers in the village to keep an eye on the dacoits, and the moment we are done with the overview of the resources, we will distribute the required commodities to the villagers," he spoke

with impeccable courtesy. His answer was concise, convincing, yet very formal and serious.

“Alright, thank you!” I said, shaking my head.

“Good Night, Ranisa,” I gulped at his reply. He spoke as if we were not husband and wife. Ironically, it had been less than a day, and my heart already longed for the side of him that gave me weird nicknames and made sarcastic remarks.

To keep the continuity of the conversation, I asked, “You’re not coming to bed?” Placing the previous papers on the table, he took another document in his hands and began going through it, not sparing a look at me.

“Pardon me, Ranisa, but I have work to do. I suggest you take a rest; you might be exhausted after the visit.” It stung me. The detachment in his tone, his neglect of my presence, and his cold behavior hurt me deeply. I kept fidgeting with the strings of my overcoat to cope with the anxiety that grew inside me in response to his silence.

A part of me argued for leaving the room, recalling how he had treated me earlier. The other part was consumed by the regret of slapping him.

I didn't know what to say, so I asked him directly. ***“Aap kab tak humse yun rusht rahenge?”*** (How long are you going to be upset with me?)

Finally, he tilted his head up and glanced at me. His lips curved into something I wouldn't call a smile, and his expression was unreadable.

“Bhala hum kaun hote hain aapse rusht hone wale? Humein kya adhikaar ki hum aapse rusht ho jaayein, Ranisa?” (Who am I to be upset with you? What right would I have to get angry with you, Ranisa?) He replied, and tears brimmed in my eyes.

“Aap aisa kyun rahe hain?” (Why are you saying so?) He smiled a little and lowered his gaze back to the papers.

“To aap humein bata dijiye ki humein kya kehna hai aur kya nahi. Paristhithi ke anukool, humaare paas kaunse adhikaar hai or kaunse nahi,” (So enlighten me, your majesty, tell me what I should say and what I should not. Depending on the circumstances, what rights do I have and what I do not?) He asked, his smooth words slicing through my heart.

“Rudra,” I approached his side of the table, and he inclined his head to look at me. “Ji, Ranisa-” I immediately cut him off. “Stop calling me that.” He nodded slightly and went back to reading the papers.

“Whatever you prefer,” I gulped and did not know what to say. Slowly stepping closer to him, I looked at the papers scattered on the table.

“What are you doing, by the way?” He remained still, not answering my question, and I leaned close to his ear.

“I know you’re upset with me, and I agree I shouldn't have slapped you,” I surrendered, and he looked up at me.

“No, it wasn't wrong of you. I deserved it, because I was wrong. I’ve always been wrong. You can try to marry my uncle for revenge, but when I objected, I was wrong. My brother jokingly calls you his wife. I objected, I am wrong,” His fingers were tightly curled around the paper, and suddenly he chuckled bitterly. “I don't even know who I am,” he kept chuckling, shaking his head.

“You’re my husband and you know it,” he began laughing, a dry, emotionless laughter.

“Alright,” he said, biting the inside of his cheek to restrain his laughter. “Jokes apart, there’s so much work to be done, so if you could please leave, I’d be truly grateful,” he added, and I moved all the papers on the table.

“No, I will not. Either you are coming with me to bed or I’m staying here with you,” I said, perching myself on the table, sitting right in front of him.

He leaned back on the chair, placed his hands on the armrest, and stared at me. Dropping the veil of shame, fear, and doubt, I looked him in the eyes, tilting my head slightly and resting my palms on either side of me.

It was an intense, heated battle between our eyes. I moved forward, intending to stand, but he beat me to it. Clasping the edge of the table beside my thighs, he tried to rise to his feet, but I immediately pressed my foot flat against his chest and shoved him back into the chair.

The sound of my anklets resonated in the hushed library, elevating the tension blazing between us. I could feel the muscles of his chest flexing beneath my foot.

With a firm push, I pressed him further back and whispered softly yet steadily, with a finality in my tone, “We're not getting out of this room until we sort things out. None of us is perfect. You make mistakes, I make mistakes. We cannot survive without each other. Our unity is our strength. We have a long way ahead, Ranaji. We cannot let our enemies sense our differences and give them a chance to break us apart.”

The way I could feel his heart pulsating fast through my feet made me realize that I was beginning to unmask his facade of politeness and break his restraint.

His chest puffed up as he inhaled deeply and landed his gaze on my foot. Slowly, he trailed his fingers on my foot, playing with my toe rings, but suddenly jerked my foot away to stand up.

“I’m done making a team with you. You play your part, and I play mine,” he said, and I strongly forced him back again, causing the wooden chair to squeak as it slid against the floor. I could feel the air thickening, coiling us in an undeniable warmth.

“And one of those parts says to listen to your wife,” I muttered, curling my lips lightly. “That’s the point, you’re not just my wife,” he said, and I glared at him, clenching my jaw.

“Now, you’re going beyond the boundaries,” I gritted.

He chuckled, “With you, my little wife.” Reclining his head on the backrest, he added, “I know no boundaries.” I gulped at his remark.

“He’s your brother. And it wasn’t deliberate; we just needed to hide our true identities to get through the checkpoint,” I explained.

Holding my gaze steadily, he asked, “What if I call Suman my wife on the same grounds?”

An instant surge of rage erupted within me, and I thrust my heel hard against his chest. “Dare you say so, and I’ll let you know,”

He smiled. “Exactly! You cannot bear any woman, even your best friend, being called as my wife for an act. Likewise, I, too, cannot bear any man calling you their wife, even if it is my brother, for a secret mission, as a joke, or as an act. I don’t care, Ranisa,” he stated.

“But, you can’t be jealous because of your little brother's joke,” I retorted, and suddenly he pushed my leg aside and hovered over me.

He instantly pulled me closer by my neck and breathed on my face, “You are not a joke, you’re my wife, my queen, my everything. And when I say you're mine, I don't mean in a way I have a possession over you, in terms of power. It means that your heart beats just and just for me, that there’s no man who, even jokingly, can call you his, not even in his dreams. Be it my uncle, my brother or anyone,” my lips parted, feeling suffocated, and I blinked with an urge.

“And, you have to promise me that you will never treat me like a slave. The way you dragged me to our chamber hurt me,” I choked on my words, and his grip tightened on my neck.

“I don’t do slaves, little wife. The only hand I ever held, of a woman, is yours. And the next time I’ll not be dragging you, I’ll throw you over my shoulder and bring you back if you try to sneak out of the palace without my awareness, understand?” he questioned, inching closer, and I nodded rapidly.

“Yes,” I said, and he loosened his hold on me.

I gasped for air, trying to steady my breath. His anger had calmed down, and his eyes softened. He gently kissed my forehead and let his lips linger briefly.

My lashes forced closed as he mumbled, “I love you so much. I just got angry and anxious seeing you sneaking out like that. I worried that if I had not caught you, I might’ve lost you.”

My eyes turned moist, and touching his cheek, I slowly murmured, “And I’m sorry for not trusting you and slapping you.” He softly caressed my neck with his thumb and said, “I told you, you can do whatever you want, but not like this.” I nodded.

Looking into my eyes, he pressed his lips against mine and gently sucked on my lower lip for several moments. Pulling away, he rested his forehead against mine and panted heavily.

“You’re making me needy, little death-bed. And, I want to punish you, so bad, right this moment,” he said, making my insides flip.

Pecking my lips once, he receded his steps and commanded, “Undress, now.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

Her mouth went agape. “What?” she questioned, her voice laced with uncertainty.

This sneaky little girl had gotten on my nerves and worried me all day because of some so-called secret mission. Now that she was standing before me, it was becoming harder to restrain myself. I wanted to hear her scream my name and enliven every pore, reminding me she was my wife, mine alone.

Sitting on the chair, I leaned back.

“You said none of us will leave this room until we sort things out. You made a mistake, so you must bear the punishment,” I said. She creased her brows together, tilting her head slightly, and suddenly a wicked smile appeared on her face.

“Punishment? I didn’t know you were into such things.”

I bit the inside of my cheek and looked at her intensely. “You don’t know me yet, my little seductress,” I said.

“Really?” she asked, raising her brows, and I nodded.

“Seduce me, none of us is going to bed until I’m done with you,” I said, and she wittily replied, “Help yourself. You hyped me up, too.”

If it were a competition, we strained equally to win by holding each other’s gazes. Her parted lips trembled with fear, yet the glint in her eyes betrayed her excitement.

Slowly, I lifted her leg and traced my fingers along her ankle. She visibly gulped at my touch. Her flowing gown had ridden up, offering me a clear view of her beautiful, slender legs.

She slumped back on her elbows, trying to balance herself, and stammered her next few words. “You’re not going down on me tonight.”

I looked into her eyes and asked, “Is that so?” She nodded, and I lowered my gaze back to her beautiful legs, her ankles jewelled divinely by the heavy anklets and toe rings.

I nipped on my lower lip, remembering the night I had tasted her for the first time: the way she moaned, weaving her fingers through my hair, squirming under me, pleased me beyond imagination.

“Maybe I am,” I said, dragging her to the edge of the table. Adjusting her leg on my shoulder, I bent forward, brushing my lips on her inner thighs.

“Rudra,” she sucked in a deep breath, and I pulled her even closer, causing her to shudder at my sudden move.

“Please do not torture me like this, if you’re not letting me feel you inside of me,” she said, dropping her head back, and I placed my mouth against her core. She smelled delicate and inviting. I couldn't stop devouring her, slowly taking my time.

“Ahh…” Her throaty breaths filled my ears, evoking every inch of me. “Tell me, who do you belong to?” I asked, swirling my tongue around her core, and she moaned louder, pointing her face in my direction.

Intuitively, my finger moved closer to her core, tugging at her skin lightly, parting it to dip my tongue deeper into the slit. “Words,” I said, playing with her wetness.

“Aaahh… you,” Fisting a handful of my hair, she arched her back and whimpered weakly. In an attempt to hold on to something, she senselessly swiped her hand across the table, scattering all the papers onto the floor.

I slowly inserted my finger into her core, earning a rough moan from her. “Ahhh…. Rudra,” I took my finger out, lapping on her skin softly. It was sudden.

“Who do you belong to, Nandani?” I asked again, and she breathlessly remarked, “Take me now and I'll tell you who I belong to.”

Pulling away, I looked at her. I gulped when she questioned me in an audacious tone. “Done playing?” Standing straight, I reached for the strings of her overcoat.

“You, my little seductress, are going to scream louder than ever,” I said, untying the knot and sliding the overcoat down her shoulder. Grabbing her by the waist, I lifted her down onto the table, but in a split moment, she knocked me over onto the chair.

“Game on, my big boy.” I studied her moves as she pinned her hair into a laid-back bun and positioned herself on my thighs, parting her legs. That bold move of hers made me swallow hard, and I slowly slid my hand to her back, pulling her closer.

Angling my face, she brought her lips closer to mine. I parted my lips in sheer desperation, but the little minx she was; she moved away when I was about to kiss her.

“Apologise, Ranaji,” she breathed, in an enticing tone on my lips, and I let out a shaky breath. “Why should I? I wasn't the one sneaking out,” brushing her lips with mine, she drew back again, teasing me, trying my forbearance.

I pushed her against my chest, catching her off guard. “Kiss me, my little wife,” I demanded, but she shook her head.

“Promise me, you’ll never get angry with me ever again.” With my other hand, I clutched her neck.

She let out a painful groan. “Gentle,” and I loosened my hold on her neck.

“Better?” I asked, and she nodded.

I slowly swept her hair on the other side of her shoulder, tracing my fingers along, feeling the hollow of her collarbone.

“The first time I saw you, this slender neck of yours caught my notice. I’m obsessed with it,” I said, nuzzling my face in the crook of her neck. The sweet scent of lavender and jasmine filled my senses, clouding my mind in a hazy blur.

Parting my lips, I began leaving wet kisses along the curve of her neck to her shoulder, causing her to shiver at my tender advances. When I deepened my touch, darting my tongue out on her skin, she abruptly moved against my hips.

“Don't move, my little temptress,” I groaned close to her ear, freezing her movements. I, again, rested my lips on the base of her neck and kissed her deeply, sucking her skin passionately, relishing the feel of her fragile body in my arms.

Fisting her hair, I aligned her head for better access, earning hushed moans from her. She pushed her chest against mine in sheer anticipation, and I tightened my hold on her hair, keeping her in place.

“I said, don't move,” I spoke in a restrained voice, and she softly whined, closing her eyes. “Why? What's happening to you?” She asked, like an innocent, unbeknownst girl, while moving my hand from her neck down to her breasts.

“Needy much?” I asked, feeling her perked up bud against my palm. As I gave a gentle squeeze to her weak spot from below, she moaned over my lips, knitting her brows together.

Hearing her enchanting rumbles, I let out a satisfying breath and took the whole of her size in my palm. “Ahhh…” A gentle gasp slipped down her lips, and she moved her lower body against mine rather desperately.

“My love, please do not move,” I said, leaning my forehead on hers. “We’re in a very perilous arrangement right now, and I'm barely holding on to the edge of the cliff of my control. A little more strain and I might lose my sanity. A part of me remembers all my vows. Still, the ravenous devil in me is urging me to toss you over on the bed, rip your clothes apart and thrust into you senselessly until my mind gets over you, which I know wouldn't,” I panted heavily, speaking my covetous thoughts out while kneading her breast.

“But I want you to love me slowly, deeply, passionately, until I forget all the times you’ve hurt me,” she said. Leaning in, I sucked on her neck harshly, scraping my teeth against her skin and muttered, “Nandani, you know it's not possible,”

Holding my gaze, she landed her soft petals on my lips, sealing our moment. Placing her hand under my chin, she sucked my fuller lips slowly, letting me feel the tenderness of her touch, the magic of being slow and gentle.

Pulling away, she looked at me and whispered, “I want to taste you.”

I blinked at her, processing what she had voiced, and shook my head in denial. “No, children do not do that.” She came closer and kissed me again.

“You want me to beg you?” She whispered in my ear. My eyes dropped on her swollen pink lips, but getting myself together, I said, “No, I’m afraid you’ll be frightened.”

Bringing her lips near my ear, she purred softly, “I know things, husband.” I smiled, fondling her breast. “Knowing things and doing things have the differences of day and night,” I said, and she lovingly kissed me on my forehead.

“I trust you, Rudra. I know you can accomplish your goals without such sacrifices,” she said, and I looked away. Indeed, it was true. I knew what I was capable of, but still…

My thoughts at that moment were overpowered by her feelings, subdued by her touch. I felt my heart beating at a maddening pace. There was this wild hunger and need in me for her. All my restraint was tied by a finely delicate thread.

“It's alright,” she said, brushing her thumb on my cheek. “I don't want to force you. I just love you so much,” She smiled weakly and pecked my cheeks.

I didn't exactly know how to describe it, but it felt like I was melting. “I know you’re burning for me, Nandani.” Closing my eyes, I pulled her into my embrace. “I know what you want, I know everything, my love. And I promise I'll never get angry with you ever again, but please don’t do things without telling me. You're the only person I've got after a decade of sacrifices. I feel for you the emotions I'm not allowed to have,” I voiced with agony.

She sucked my earlobe, the warmth of her tongue sending chills down my spine. Her actions aroused me. I shut my eyes; the desire was too intense—it had me gripped in its clutches.

“Punish me, please,” she whispered, pulling away. I opened my eyes to the sight of her cheeks glowing with the shade of roses.

Holding her chin up, I asked in a low tone, “Tell me, what do you want?” She blinked nervously, her chest heaving rhythmically, giving away her shyness. Casting her lashes low, she muttered in a low, meek tone, “Yo... your... fin... finger,”

I pulled her into a tight hug and kissed the crown on her head. Stroking the length of her hair, I said, “I’m all yours, Nandani.” Rising to my feet, I effortlessly lifted her and tossed her on my shoulder.

“Rudra! I am almost naked,” she yelped in shock, her body tensing, and she instinctively clung to me for support. “I told you, with you, I know no boundaries,” I retorted, picking her overcoat from the table before striding out of the library.

“Rudra, please, if anyone saw me like this, I'll be so embarrassed to even meet eyes with them,” she whined, kicking her feet in the air.

“This area is off-limits to men.” She gripped my back, hiding her face, when a girlish voice rang out in the hallways.

“Ranaji!” I looked at a surprised Suman, and Nandani nervously muttered her name under her breath, “Suman.” She immediately lowered her head.

“Do not disturb us,” I said, entering the bedroom.

Locking the door, I took her to the bed, and she cried, “She saw us.”

I put her down on the bed. Her face flushed crimson. Palming her face, she mumbled, “Oh God, Rudra.” I smiled at her reaction, pulling my kurta off, and threw it right on her face.

She looked at me through her lashes when I got on the bed. “Widen your legs for me, little wife,” I said, and a gasp slipped off her lips.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

My heart leapt into my throat.

Suman saw us in a very scandalous embrace: me, on his shoulder, in just a nightgown, my legs on display.

My insides somersaulted when I watched him getting on the bed. The heat prevailing between us pulled us closer like a magnetic force. His partly naked, finely built body, his muscular arms and abs—a sinful delight for my eyes.

“Widen your legs, love,” he said, and I looked up at him. As he sneaked closer, my body subconsciously began to move back in anticipation.

Part of me was thrilled, eagerly awaiting his advances and wanting to satiate my howling desires. Yet, another part of me was equally burdened by the dread of impending possibilities—possibilities that caused a whirlwind to spin in my belly.

Nearing steadily, he trailed his fingers over my calf, awakening every fibre of my being while grazing my thighs. The barest interactions of his fingertips with my body, his fleeting touches, ignited a flame so rich in passion, it turned me breathless.

He, inching closer, lowered himself and pressed a prolonged kiss against my midriff through the garment. With his knees in between, he parted my legs wider and hovered over me, locking his gaze with mine, filled with unspoken needs.

As he pressed in on me to place a pillow under my head, my lips brushed against his jaw for a split moment. To his demand, I inhaled a shaky breath and opened my legs wide for him.

“You are so beautiful, inside and out,” he said, his eyes tracing my features as his gaze often drifted between my eyes and my lips. He gently caressed my cheek, and I yielded to his touch, surrendering to the warmth of his hands. “Really?” I asked.

I didn't know what it was. Was it the night dimly lit by candles? Was it the room filled with our blended scents? Was it our ragged breaths blowing on each other's faces, or were his feathery touches that put me in a daze and filled my mind with delightful sensations?

My master was indeed right. Love-making between a couple isn't necessarily and ideally hasty, and filled with just carnal hunger and fleshly desire. Pleasurable sensations are enlivened with subtle, tender touches, with immense care, admiration, words of compliments, caresses that drive the butterflies to flap their wings heavily in our belly. It is in the fleeting eye contact and the longing for each other that arouses the need to have the most passionate unions. Because I could feel all that, he was making me live all of it.

I arched my back, burning in an unquenchable yearning. My insides churned, feeling my core throb, a knot so tight in my lower abdomen, demanding a release. Yet he took it at a steady pace.

“Hnnn…” He hummed, planting a slow, deliberate kiss on my cheek, savoring the moment and searing warmth into my skin. My eyes squeezed shut, feeling his weight on me as our chests collided in a feverish intimacy.

Opening my eyes, I gazed into his deep, intense eyes, with his fuller lips and chiseled jaw. His features always put me in a gawking haze.

I felt his fingers crawl over my knee, raising it high, and a soft gasp slipped from my lips as I sensed his waist stroking against my inner thighs. I shuddered at the sensation of the cool air hitting my exposed legs and clutched his upper arm with expectancy.

Delving his face into my neck, he captured my earlobe between his teeth, causing me to hiss at the pleasurable ache.

I tried to slow the heavy rise and fall of my chest as he bit my ear harshly, eliciting a throaty moan from me. I clung to him with desperation, pulling him closer and holding his nape. The clattering of my bangles resonated deeply in the chamber, causing me to curl my toes in anticipation.

“You have such a sensitive body, little seductress,” he breathed near my ear, his wild breathing fanning over my neck, hands feathering my thighs and sending shivers down my spine.

“Uh… I’m loving your touch,” I said, my voice shaky, laced with devouring desire. His fingers were on all the right spots, as if he knew where I was most sensitive, rekindling them with his tortures.

While nibbling on my ear, he moved fingers to my core, his pace gentle, his eyes on me, like he was exploring. I slowly swept his long fringes aside, falling on his sweaty forehead, and bit my lower lip as I felt him gliding his finger on my slick folds.

“Ahhh…” A needy gasp left my mouth, my hips in sync, riding on his fingers, my arousal deepening with his intensifying progress. He showered my face with feather-light kisses, holding my neck in place, igniting my senses.

A shuddering moan escaped me, and my body elevated as he began rubbing my core swiftly in a circular motion, and I sealed my eyes shut.

Kissing the side of my lips, he muttered. “Look at me, Nandani,”

Hearing my name spill from his mouth, smooth, with so much fervency, was strangely satisfying. Suddenly, he slipped his fingers inside, and I clamped onto his upper arm, opening my eyes wide, and looked at him.

The cold uneasiness of his thick finger began taking over the sensations, making me wriggle under him, yet his deep eyes had me bound in their entice.

“Breath, my love,” He said. “Don’t strain yourself.” With that, he slid half his finger inside of me, making me almost whimper at the piercing pain.

The muscles in my hips and legs tightened, and I stretched my body, pressing my head uneasily into the mattress. I breathed hastily at the nuance of his touch.

“Calm down, little bird,” he said, his tone gentle and full of patience. Cautiously, he took his finger out, and I instantly whined at the loss of his touch, feeling void.

He moved his mouth over mine, claiming my lips in a slow, searing kiss that left me dizzy.

“I’ll go deeper now, let me know if you feel pain or discomfort,” he muttered, and I gulped, envisioning his long fingers in me. “Okay?” He asked, and I nodded absentmindedly.

Holding my gaze, he slowly let his finger nudge in again, delicately building up stronger sensations, letting me feel all of it. My breathing turned uneven, my insides struggled to settle in place, and my brows knitted together at the profound feeling.

I opened my eyes and peeked at his flushed face through my heavily batting lashes. “You are so tight, little death-bed,” he growled in a low tone, placing his forehead over mine, and a wave of stun passed down my spine at what he said.

It still felt unpleasant, fixating all my focus on it. To divert my mind from it, I watched his throat move as he swallowed hard, like he was restraining himself.

He tightened his grip on my neck, spreading my legs more apart and slid his finger deeper, earning a loud moan from me. “Ahhhh…..”

I lost all control over myself; my nails gouged his shoulder as he pushed further inside. It was impossible for me, my voice hitched as I gasped for air, and a strident whimper spilt past my lips.

Even though the pain was persistent, the stinging sensation gradually began to turn into a tingle. There was a slight discomfort, yet the hint of peak arousal was prudent with the way he was playing with my wetness.

“Loosen up,” He said, and I blinked in a stupor, with my lips agape, taking in heavy gushes of air. It took me a good few seconds to comprehend what he was demanding.

I closed my eyes nervously, steadying my breath to ease the tension from my body.

Trust is essential during physical intimacy between a couple, and I truly loved how he was fostering it between us.

“Good girl,” he mumbled against my cheek while kissing me hungrily, trying to distract me from the emerging pain that had built up when he drove his finger all the way in.

I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut, holding onto his arm tighter.

“Calm down, Nandani,” he said, and I opened my eyes. The view of the ornate ceiling seemed blurred to my vision. I wrung the bedsheets in my fists near my head, and my back curved upward since he kept kissing me passionately.

My heart was beating so rapidly and loudly, I was sure he could hear it. “Calm down, Nandani. Let yourself feel it. Isn't it beautiful?” He whispered and took the edge of my ear between his lips, making hair on every inch of my skin hoist at his burning yet delightful touch.

My core twitched when he suddenly flicked his finger inside me, hitting a spot that made bliss engulf me, surging through every nerve of my body. It felt like I was about to explode, shattering into pieces, and suddenly I felt an urge building up in me to feel something identical right at the moment.

“Feel it, Nandani. Hold it back until I tell you,” he said, biting on my jaw, thrusting his finger in and out. I cried softly, my body shaking, trying to match his pace, legs and stomach contracting hard, clamouring for a release.

“Ahhh…. Rudra,” my lips trembled as his name stammered its way out of my mouth. With his other hand, he clutched my hand, which was latched onto the bedsheet, and kissed his way through my neck.

It was overwhelming; his finger pressed against my sensitive spot repeatedly, his lips brushing my skin, his hand guiding me, his husky body enveloping me.

“Ah…. Rudra,” I screamed his name at a sharp, high pitch, my blood curdling with the intensifying tension.

My throat ran dry, and I bit my lower lip when he muttered, “Good girl, hold it like that.”

I was sweating profusely, the fabric clung to my body, my knees were up high as he hungrily sucked on the side of my neck, leaving a stingy pain on my flesh. Reaching out, I clasped onto his neck from behind at the heightened emotions.

I couldn’t breathe, I wanted to get over this helplessness, I could feel the peak of my arousal. Never in my whole life had I ever felt so. It was maddening, heart-pounding, yet ecstatic. It felt like my body wasn’t in my control; I was in his power.

“Ahhh… Rudra, please,” I pleaded, digging my nails into flesh, piercing his skin.

He knew what he was doing, hitting the tip of his finger at this one spot, over and over, driving me wild.

“Please, Rudra, I’m begging you,” I cried out erratically, but he went on, tormenting my collarbone with his teeth, nipping on them earnestly.

Soaring his mouth up my neck, he sucked me under the jaw and I began quivering under him uncontrollably. The more I tried to calm my hammering heart and steady my breath, the more I failed. My mind, my sanity, my attention, all of it at stake, pinned on his finger inside me.

“Please… Rudra, just let me…” I begged—my tone insistent, filled with immense desperation.

He knew how to end this. He was making me feel all this. Pushing me to the edge and keeping me from letting it out.

“Plea…” I made an attempt to speak, but I couldn't. I laboured to breathe. The last ounce of sanity left my body. I was flushed, on the brink of losing my consciousness, the sensational pleasure too exhilarating, but tiring.

A low, throaty moan escaped me, and he lifted his face, demanding, “Look at me.” he was panting too, his voice hoarse, and I tried to look through my dazed vision.

Leaning in, he clashed his lips on mine, thrusting his tongue fervently into my mouth. And it happened.

My pulse shifted rhythmically, my breath quickened, my body shook frenziedly, and I whimpered loudly into his mouth.

It felt as though I was flooded with a gush of sensation flowing through my veins, my whole body. The room around me faded into an oblivion of pleasure. The slick release heated me entirely, and I closed my eyes, giving in to the kiss with equal fire.

He drew his finger out, kissing me gently, letting me catch my breath. Pulling away, he looked into my eyes, and I was flabbergasted. W*hat the hell just happened?* I thought.

The corner of his lips flicked up as he smiled softly, caressing my cheek.

I turned my head aside, blinking rapidly, and chewed my lower lip. My knees were still wobbly, and the area between my legs throbbed with an electrifying sensation.

Planting a kiss on my forehead, he whispered, “I love you, Nandani.” On instinct, my lips stretched into a grin. “I hope you enjoyed your punishment, little deathbed.” Flustered by his words, I hugged him closer, and he showered my neck with light kisses, here and there, his beard tickling me, making me giggle.

But then, my smile faltered as an important question arose in my mind. I slightly nudged him back and looked at him, tilting my head.

“Are you sure you’ve never done this before?” I asked. He chuckled amusedly at my question and pressed his lips to my temple.

Shifting beside me, he rested his face on one elbow, and softly brushing my stomach, he said, “Yes, I’m sure,”

I turned on his side and asked, “But how do you know so much? You know, my master once said that a man could spend his whole life and he still wouldn't understand what a woman wants.”

He kissed my forehead lovingly, letting his lips linger there briefly, and looked back at me with a gentle smile.

“What king is a king if he doesn’t know how to satisfy his woman—physically, mentally and emotionally,” he stated, petting my head. “Family is the closest thing to a king as a man, and if he cannot understand his own family’s needs, to build trust and to treat them respectfully, I believe, no amount of knowledge and power

can prevent him from failing in his life. I never understood the significance of these lessons when I was still young, but now I'm trying to."

I was genuinely impressed by this man. I kissed him on the jaw and asked, "But you're a celibate. Did you not feel driven while learning all of this?" He inhaled a deep breath and kissed my forehead softly.

"I read books—romantic ones, with erotic texts. I even read the Kamasutra to test my control. It was like giving exams," he said.

His revelation stunned me. "You read Kamasutra?" I asked with wide eyes.

He nodded with a smile, lying straight on his back, and I was curious, which led me to ask him, "What positions do you like?"

He suddenly burst into a fit of laughter, his chest rumbling with a spark of amusement.

I stared at him, perplexed. *Did I say anything wrong?* I wondered.

Sighing heavily, he pulled me closer and stroked my back, while I looked at him, uncertain. "I have tried nothing. How'd I know what I like?" He said, moving his fingers through the length of my hair, playing with them.

"Well, something must've caught your interest," I countered, settling my chin on his shoulder.

He clicked his tongue, looking into the distance. "I don't know. Never thought about it," He replied, lifting his head, casting a playful look my way. "What do you like?" he asked, mischief shimmering in his eyes.

I immediately felt a warm flush on my face, a wave of timidity washing over me. "Me?" I asked with hesitation. And he yanked me closer, making me lie over his chest.

"Yes, you," He responded, and I pressed my palm against his chest, steadying myself, tucking my loose tresses behind my ears. Helping me pin my hair behind, he instantly sat straight, laying me down and said, "Let me guess,"

"You like it gentle, so probably the straddling one while seated and spooning from behind while lying," He said, pulling my inner gown up to my abdomen. I quivered under the cold sensation of his touch on my waist as he fiddled with my Kamarband.

"Really?" I asked in a low, shivery tone. "Hnn-hnn" He hummed and went down, blowing my midriff with hot air, touching my waist with his lips.

As I felt his warm tongue contacting my skin, I instantly pushed myself upright and asked, "What are you doing?" I looked at him, unclasping my Kamarband with his teeth. Pulling away, he slid my inner down and took the ornament out of his mouth.

"I want this," he said, tying it around his wrist. My breath hitched, coming out in shallow wisps as I watched him move closer. "Help me," he said, showing his hand, and I blinked nervously, adjusting my posture.

“Why're you wearing it on your wrist?” I asked, helping him hook the ends of the chain.

“I'm the first, and I’m going to be the last one who fingered you. I'm the only man to make you feel the way you felt not long ago,” He said, fixing his gaze with mine in an unwavering focus. “So, the next time you try to compare me with anyone, you remember this.” With his other hand, he dragged me closer by my waist, settling me onto his lap.

“And, remember, who you belong to,” He added, and my chest rose and fell heavily, brushing against his bare one in a rhythm. “Every inch of you belongs to me, Nandani. Your pleasure, your pain, your desires, everything comes from me,” I was entranced, listening to his gravelly yet enticing voice.

He held my nape, his eyes tracing over my face like a gentle graze, finally settling on my lips, staring at them with a burning desire. Leaning in, he devoured my lower lip with a desperate pull, sucking hard before finally releasing it.

I closed my eyes, trying to contain my overflowing emotions and calm my racing heart. “Who do you belong to, little wife?” He asked, his breath fanning over my face. Inhaling deeply, I said, “You,”

The memory of my moans, whimpers and extreme sensations that I felt not long ago danced across my mind, haunting my thoughts, keeping me far from my sanity.

“Rudra... I belong to you,” I spoke as if I were under a spell—his spell—the spell of his charm, his seduction, his touch.

He yanked me over his lap, digging his fingertips into my hips, and kissed me breathlessly as I straddled him.

Pulling away, he said, “The next time you do something I don’t like, I’ll make you ride your hips like this until you scream out of pleasure and cry with the weakness in your knees, little seductress,” his statement was possessive, full of power, like a final verdict.

Mustering courage, I looked into his alluringly commanding eyes and said, “I bet that you will not be continuing your celibacy anymore.”

As he yanked me even closer, our breathing quickened, and a flame of dominance ignited between us. His lips curved into a sly smile.

“Bahut choti hai abhi aap... Ro jaayengi,” (You're too young... I'm afraid you might cry.) He said, kissing the side of my lips, holding my cheek, and I literally shivered. A powerful spark of thrill passed through my body, leaving my skin burning with its essence.

“Dar gayi na aap,” (You got scared.) I lowered my gaze to his lips, blinking my eyes, leaning in to place my lips over his.

I bit on his lower lip, pulling it out, drawing fresh, dark blood.

He let out a throaty grunt and stared at me intently, and I uttered over his mouth, ***“Aap rula lijiye, hum sehan kar lenge,”*** (Make me cry, I’ll bear it.) He abruptly pushed me down on the mattress, hovered above me.

Clamping dangerously on my neck, he nipped at my jaw, sucking the skin down to my neck like a starving man.

Moving south, he smashed his lips against mine, crushing my nape eagerly, making me moan into his mouth. As he pressed his lips over my jaw roughly, my eyebrows knitted together, deliriously. I moaned again at his nuances.

Breaking free, he pressed his forehead against my temple, panting heavily. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply to calm myself.

“Rudra,” I called him cautiously. “Calm down, please.” I softly stroked his arm, attempting to steady him. It wasn’t the right time to do it. How could I have forgotten that he was controlling? He could not cross the limit—he wasn’t supposed to. He had worked hard, restraining himself for ten years. “Hey, Rudra, please,” I tried to draw his attention.

His hold on my neck loosened, and he lifted his eyes, gazing at me longingly. I shook my head lightly, biting my lower lip. “Not like this. Not until you want, please,” I said.

Holding my hand closer to his lips, he shut his eyes, taking deep breaths. He tenderly left feathery kisses on my fingers and my palm. Once he was relaxed, he opened his eyes and looked at me.

“I think we should go to sleep now,” I muttered feebly. He again kissed my palm intensely.

I could sense his tension. I had never seen him the way he was a few moments ago. His eyes radiated with raw hunger.

Watching him calm himself down calmed me as well. Perhaps I shouldn’t have made such a demand that made him lose control.

He straightened himself, and I palmed my face, trying to get a grip on myself. Getting off the bed, he slowly muttered, “Stand up.” Obeying him, I stood up and adjusted my dress.

Picking up my overcoat, he handed it to me and said, “Get dressed.” As I slipped my arms into it, he helped me tie the strings at my front and turned me around. Carefully, he parted my hair and began braiding it.

I gulped, playing with the strings of my coat as he tied the end of my braid with a lace. After he was done, he hugged me from behind and gently kissed the side of my head.

“Be my strength, Nandani, or we both are going to regret it,” he whispered slowly. I could understand what he was trying to say, and I also knew that I had to control myself for him. I had to contribute to this cause, supporting him. “You are surely the death of me,” he mumbled, and I turned to look at him.

Tracing my face with his gaze, he lifted my chin and observed my neck. “You will need a huge necklace tomorrow,” He said, and I immediately touched my neck.

Pacing towards the mirror, I noticed fresh red bruises on my neck. “Noooo,” I whined. “Rudra,”

He bit his lower lip, controlling his smile, and said, “You made me do this.”

He immediately lifted me in his arms when I sulked back to him. “Time to go to the carpet, little queen,” I burst into laughter. He took me to the courtyard and put me down.

“Wait for me,” He said and went back again. Returning with the mattress and comforter, he laid them on the floor.

“Come,” I settled beside him, and he hugged me from behind. Kissing my hair softly, he said, “Wish me luck, Nandani. Tomorrow is an important day.”

I peered sideways and asked, “What's important?”

He inhaled a deep breath and replied, “Tomorrow we will know whether our neighbouring states are with me. It will decide my future as a king. And if the majority favours me, new peace treaties will be signed, and perhaps the Yagna will occur sooner, which would mean the end of my celibacy.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

As she turned her head sideways, her beautiful eyes twinkled like stars in the moonlight, and her thick lashes fluttered darkly, resembling a forest of mysteries. Her skin glowed like the moon itself in the night.

Everything about her was flawless, from the way she talked and carried herself to the way she looked at me. It felt as if she knew the effect she had on me, gazing into my eyes with those innocent yet tempting eyes.

I didn’t know if it was something she learned from her seduction lessons, but she was indeed aware of how to make me stare at her face, how to make me attracted enough that I could not suppress my urges around her. Everything about her was so pleasing. It felt calm and peaceful just to stare at her a little longer.

I took a deep breath and replied, “Tomorrow we’ll know whether the neighbouring states are with me. This will decide my future as a king. And, if the majority favours my ruling, new peace treaties will be signed, and maybe the Yagna will be held sooner. Which means the end of my celibacy,”

“Hard work and dedication always pay off,” she said. I gulped, as her words reminded me of all the times—when I was a kid and when I became an adult—the work that I had done: the hard work, the workouts, the education, and the sacrifices. It evoked memories of all the times I cried in pain, of both visible and invisible injuries.

“I hope so,” I mumbled, lost in thought.

Closing my eyes, I drew her closer and rested my chin on her head. I couldn’t decipher why, but being with her made me feel so complete. There were times when I wondered why, even after going through numerous difficulties and struggling so much in life, I didn’t embrace—part of me wasn't content with any of it.

For me, failures were lessons, and everything I had endured was a path that led me to where I was.

Our hardships refine us, and no life is free from struggles and failures.

My Guruji taught me that our mind and body are shaped this way: we need something to keep us engaged. We can’t sit idly for too long because our brains never stop processing. They always seek.

And I enjoyed my life that way, for I loved challenges, tackling problems. It was fruitful, but never peaceful. I only realised that after marrying her.

My thoughts conflicted between what I wanted and what I was bound to do. Did I want this peace—or was I supposed to keep striving for the kingdom? What did I really want? I had a list of goals I hoped to achieve in thirty years, believing that attaining them would bring me happiness. But now, I wasn't so sure.

Having everything and not her—the thought alone chilled me to the bone. Like, how would I survive even a day without seeing her, hearing her voice, touching her, and feeling her?

She completed me.

I felt her body relax, telling me she had fallen asleep. She must've been tired from our little make-out session. I kissed her forehead and closed my eyes, too.

Waking up earlier the following day, I quietly observed her, still in a deep sleep. I gently caressed her cheek, waking her slowly, "Get up, little wife,"

She shifted slightly when she heard my voice and mewled away to the other side, covering her face with the comforter.

Alright, she was in deep sleep.

Sliding closer, I pulled the comforter down her face. "Nandani, you have so much work to do," I said, nudging her gently.

"Daadisa, sone dijiye na. Hum thake hue hain kal raatri se," (Daadisa, let me sleep, please. I'm tired from last night.) she replied, and a wide smile etched over my face. She must have been dreaming. I didn't have the heart to wake her as her voice came out adorably soft.

Getting up, I picked her up in my arms to take her to the bedchamber since the bright sun could disturb her sleep.

Placing her gently over the mattress, I covered her with the comforters. "Sleep tight, little bird," I whispered, kissing her forehead.

Tucking herself tighter in the comforter, she mumbled, "Thank you, Ranaji."

After drawing the curtains, I followed my morning routine—freshening up, meditating, working out, bathing, getting ready, and praying. When I stepped out of the prayer room, my gaze fell on the attendees, whispering in hushed tones.

"Ranisa is still sleeping,"

"What!?"

"Yes,"

"But it's really late."

The chatter halted as I cleared my throat, and they all turned stiff.

"Let Ranisa sleep. Don't wake her up," I said, and they bowed in acceptance.

From there, I went to meet Agastya and Ranvijay in the meeting hall.

"Bhaisa," They both stood as soon as I walked in, and my sight fell on a pile of papers, some scrolls and bundled letters on a table.

"Please, sit," I said, taking a seat.

"Is the assessment done, Agastya?" I asked, and I could feel the edge in my voice, steady yet stressed.

I scanned his face as he took a momentary pause and nodded, "Ji, Bhaisa." I didn't miss the strain in his tone, and I knew what he was about to say wouldn't exactly be honey to my ears.

I watched silently as he unfolded one document and placed it between us on the table.

“Our situation is not very pleasant,” He said, pointing his finger at one of the many entries in the list—Defence. “We’re not available with enough resources to reorganise our defence system, which is lacking. I’m afraid we’re not well equipped to fight a mighty force like Mahabaleshgarh and the eight kingdoms of the south, the Sinds. Undoubtedly, our fort is well-constructed, and because of its structure atop hills, we have an advantage over the advancing enemies. Still, at such heights, the drainage and water channels function poorly. A major part of our finances is spent on bringing water from the mainland,” I listened to him attentively as he detailed. “Also, we must enlist new soldiers in our army since the last recruitment took place two decades ago, leaving us with many aged forces,” He finished, and I nodded.

“I assumed that. No doubt why the old king lost his sons,”

He nodded, and added, “The resources we’re left with are just twenty per cent of what Suryagarh possessed back then at grandfather’s reign,” and it hit me.

Suryagarh was a prosperous kingdom in its prime—its grandeur and brilliance still captivated people’s eyes. And I believed that, like us, many were unaware of its glorious past.

“That old bastard stripped the kingdom to its roots,” I cursed under my breath, and Agastya again spoke. “And, Bhaisa, this list does not include the assets which we were to receive from Mahabaleshgarh on your marriage.” As soon as he finished, I looked sharply into his eyes.

“That will never be included. The only association I have with Mahabaleshgarh is Nandani; nothing else,” Gulping, he lowered his gaze to the papers.

“In that case, we must formulate new strategies to restore our assets, because without sufficient resources, we’ll achieve nothing,” he said.

“I agree,” Ranvijay added, and they looked at me for a response.

“I understand. But we’ll have to think of a way to do everything without burdening the people,” I stated.

“I believe our immediate needs will be met once I marry the Princess of Songarh,” Ranvijay said, and I glanced at him.

“No, that will be your and your wife’s personal wealth.”

“It is a political marriage, Bhaisa. Nothing is personal,” he retorted, yet I shook my head.

“No, that wealth is for you and the princess. You can contribute a part of it, if you wish. But we cannot put it to use directly for the kingdom,” I said, and he looked down, sadly, when Agastya spoke.

“Bade Bhaisa is right, Bhaisa. You may lend us the money and we’ll return it once we are well off—”

“Who is lending to whom?” Suddenly, Nandani walked into the meeting hall, looking fresh and radiant. My eyes immediately fell on her neck. Although she had covered it with the dupatta, I could still see the outlines of the dark bruise.

“Ranvijay Bhaisa might lend to the royal treasury,” Agastya informed her, and I shot him a warning glance.

“Why so?” She asked as she swept in my direction and stood beside me elegantly.

“We’re looking for a source of revenue to rebuild the kingdom and working on people’s welfare,” Agastya said, and Ranvijay offered, “Please have a seat, Bhabhisa.”

I scooted a little for her to sit, and she looked closely at the papers.

“How long can we survive with what we have now?” She asked, sitting beside me, and I frowned at the sudden question.

The room went quiet for a moment.

Breaking the silence, Agastya answered in a distressed tone, “Hardly, five years, if nothing bad happens—no extra expenses covered. We might survive these years, but with no revenue growth,” she nodded thoughtfully.

“And how long until we rebuild the palace's outskirts and sponsor the people's food and education?” He gulped nervously, sneaking a glance at me, shaking his head lightly.

“The reconstruction of the outskirts of the palace will take almost eighty per cent of the royal treasure,” Ranvijay answered instead.

“With that, we will have only one year to survive,” Agastya said. She turned to me.

“Ranaji, we must start the reconstruction process as soon as possible,” she began, and I looked at her uncertainly. “What I mean to say is, if the subjects live closer to the palace, the gap between the royalty and the people will lessen. Commoners will show interest in joining the royal army and staff, eventually building trust between us. When our people have faith in us, the neighbouring states can also place their trust in us. They will see that you are here, not just to rule but to provide,” Tuning fully to face, she spoke seriously, “Your claim on the throne is not temporary. So have a vision—a long-term goal in mind. You can attract investments and loans by showing that we are prospering and ready to offer. Once we have the flow of revenue right, we can use that to strengthen our defence system,” she suggested.

“But, Bhabhisa, we cannot risk everything just for this. If, in between, we are attacked, we might not survive the war,” Ranvijay brought up, and I nodded.

“He’s got a point here,”

Taking a deep breath, she sat straight and said, “Then, I will take charge of it. Let me sponsor,”

Suddenly, a wave of shock and silence echoed loudly in the hall. We all looked at her, stunned.

“How?” I asked, and she lowered her gaze.

“Since I cannot ask for any support from Mahableshgarh,” she spoke, gazing at me. “I will conduct an auction to sell the extra jewellery I received from my kingdom and have as the queen of Suryagarh.”

I immediately denied. “No,” my brothers also showed disagreement.

“Why?” she questioned. I looked at her, lifting my brows, daring her to repeat herself. She locked her eyes challengingly with me.

“Those ornaments are mine. I can use them however I want. And I want to help. It is better to do it this way than simply donating them.”

I shook my head. “No, that's not happening,” I said.

“Why? They are mine. I can use them as I want,” she retorted with unwavering determination.

“No, Nandani, that is not happening. You’re right. They are yours, not meant to be spent on the kingdom’s affairs. So, it’s a no,” I clarified, and she immediately stood up.

“Then, I’m not asking you,” she exclaimed, and I inhaled a deep breath, not believing how she could say that.

“What do you mean?” I asked, and she looked at me like she had decided.

“That belongs to me. And, I think I can decide on my assets. Whether to keep or to sell is in my hands,” she replied, and I gritted, “But, Nandani, you can—”

“Ranaji,” an attendant walked into our heated discussion, and we all looked at him. I gestured for him to continue.

Bowing, he informed us, “Everyone is waiting for the meeting in the courtroom.” As he finished, we all looked at each other.

Agastya began folding the scrolls, and Ranvijay nodded at me, standing up. “I think it's time,” I said, rising to my feet, and looked at Nandani.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said, and she nodded curtly.

“All the best,” she muttered slowly. Ranvijay and Agastya had already left the hall.

Stepping forward, I gently kissed her forehead, holding her face. In her arms, I visibly relaxed, and my heart rate calmed down as I was anxious about the outcome.

Well, no matter how much we try, we can never completely rid ourselves of the nervousness that arises before the results, which often shape our actions. The fear of results sometimes hampers our confidence and performance. However, success or failure depends mainly on the process itself. And if we spend too much time thinking of the end, we lose focus on giving our best in the present.

I took a step away, and she gave a warm smile. I knew she was too worried about the outcomes, but she concealed it behind her neutral expression.

Turning around, I followed Agastya and Ranvijay and walked into the courtroom.

The attendants pushed the door open for us, and I stepped inside, taking a deep breath. My sight landed on everyone seated—gossiping, murmuring—suddenly stopping, and heads turned in my direction.

The soft thud of my heels against the marble floor echoed in the silent room as I marched in, with Agastya and Ranvijay close behind. The free end of my silk shawl, usually draped over my left shoulder, brushed against the floor with every step I took toward the throne.

Climbing the stairs, I turned to look at everyone before taking a seat. In a glance, I recognized every significant personality who needed to be present, and then I looked at Ranvijay.

“Please proceed with the hearing.”

bowing in respect, he said, ***“Ranaji, matdaan se poorv, hum ek baar punah navkrut niyamoan ka uccharaan sabhi ki upasthiti mein karna chaahenge,”*** (Ranaji, before the voting takes place, I would like to repeat the revised rules once again in everyone's presence.)

“Awashya,” (Sure.) I allowed him.

Facing everyone, he began reading the new regulations.

“Songarh se humein har maas jo senya sahaayata praapt hogi uske sthaan par hum wahaan jwaar va baajre ki poorti karenge. Cheeranjeevigarh se humaara anya anaajoan ka len-den rahega. Iske atirikt anya rajyoan se jo bhi vyapar hoga vo aawashyakta anusaar hoga, anayatha, jab aavashyakta padegi, tab hoga. Sabhi rajyoan aur Suryagarh ke madhya yudh ki stheeti uttapanna nahi hogi, aur yadi kisi aur rajya ke saath yudh hoga to sabhi rajya humein sainya bal va samarthan pradaan karenge. Suryagarh bhi aavashyakta padne par peeche nahi hatenge, iske atirikt, jin rajyoan ke saath niji pratastav hai, ve unke shaanti prastaav lekh me varnit hai,” (In return for the defence support we will receive from Songarh every month, we will supply them with barley and millet. With Cheeranjeevigarh, other food crops will be traded fairly. Also, trading with other states will be based on necessity, or when required. There will be no war scenario between Suryagarh and any of the allied states. If there is a warlike situation with an enemy kingdom, all the states will provide us with military support and assistance. Suryagarh too will not step back when needed. Except for these, other clauses are added to the respective contracts of each of the states for confidentiality reasons.)

When he was done, I looked at the kings seated with blank faces. The tension in the air was palpable, and the silence that followed was profound.

Ranvijay then announced, “Now, we should start the voting.” Just as he finished, one of the members abruptly rose from his seat.

“Wait,” Everyone was astonished by his intrusion, and he looked at me.

“Ranaji, we are all very well aware of the current situation of Suryagarh. But many of us are afraid to bring this into the light,” He said, taking a deep breath.

I scratched the nail of my forefinger at the side of my thumb as I listened to him further.

“We all heartily congratulate you on becoming the king. You surely are the most deserving one. Yet we, as kingdoms, are here, agreeing to help you in any warfare, right?” He asked, and I nodded.

“Yes, absolutely,” I answered.

“We all will agree to it, but on one condition,” he animated it for me with his hands.

I straightened myself and asked, “What condition?”

Raking his eyes at everyone in the hall once, he continued, “You see, Ranaji, we’re all the kings of small states. We do not hold much power. If in the future, in any way, a large kingdom attacks Suryagarh, they might destroy us too,”

Furrowing my eyebrows, I asked, “Kingdom like which?”

Rubbing his chin, he looked down for a brief moment and lifted his eyes back to look at me confidently, saying, “Kingdom like Mahabaleshgarh”

Suddenly, the hall erupted with people’s murmurings, and I rose from my seat. “Don’t try to step out of the line,” I said politely, balling my palms into fists, controlling my emotions.

He smiled warmly. “I’m not even trying to, Ranaji. But none of us here is deprived of the information on the shared history of both the kingdoms. Then this forced marriage between you and Princess Rajnanadani. I don't know why they did not object to it, but I’m certain the ties between the kingdoms are strained. And this might eventually lead to a war between two massive kingdoms. All the present kings and I want a peace treaty to be signed between Mahabaleshgarh and Suryagarh, before any peace treaties are signed between Suryagarh and other states,” He concluded, and I inhaled deeply.

I tried to calm my anger and looked at everyone. The silence made it evident—they all agreed with him.

But, Mahabaleshgarh. No.

“This is impossible,” I said firmly, and he blinked, lowering his gaze for a moment. A heavy silence followed.

“Then I take a step back from signing the peace treaty,” he said. “There will be no use of those peace treaties if we deploy our defence systems for the wars between these two kingdoms. My state and I would like to stay independent.”

I clenched my jaw tight. Tension grew in the room, and suddenly, Ranvijay asked, “Who all agrees with King Uday Singh ji?”

My breathing quickened, and I found most of the kings standing in his support. I felt my heart beating a little faster.

Ranvijay and Agastya looked at me, and I inhaled a deep breath. I had to answer.

My problems were nowhere near decreasing. In no world could I sign a peace treaty with Mahabaleshgarh—not until the king and the queen were alive.

They were the reason why we suffered so much. Like, how could someone kill the other so effortlessly? That too, for something wrong. She was promised to my father, and they both killed my father.

No way, I couldn’t sign a peace treaty with them. Yes, I knew that Nandani and I had got married, but a peace treaty—that was too much.

But I had to speak—something.

“I want you all to wait and see what we can do in this regard,” I said, and they looked at each other before sitting down.

But the person who proposed this was still standing, looking at me. “Ranaji, this peace treaty is essential in so many ways,”

I immediately replied, “Yeah, I heard that.” He shut his mouth.

“Now, I want you all to rest and enjoy today's special lunch,” I said, stepping down from the throne.

My mind had already scrambled beyond control. I sprinted out of the courtroom, ending the conversation without realizing what its conclusion was. Moving toward our chamber, I went to the rooftop because I needed time alone to think and settle my thoughts.

The day passed as I walked back and forth, creating countless scenarios and thinking of endless possibilities.

The sun hid behind the horizon, and I witnessed the nightfall right before my eyes.

I called an attendee and asked him to bring a mattress and a comforter. I decided to sleep on the terrace. Looking at her face would’ve only reminded me of our condition. And I didn't want to hurt her.

The attendee returned with what I asked, and I laid the bed. Removing my kurta, I lay down and looked at the stars.

I closed my eyes and kept thinking of other ways to solve the problem.

We, no doubt, needed the support of these states to ensure our victory against Mahabaleshgarh. So, how was I supposed to sign a peace treaty with them?

Time passed, and at midnight, when I was still deep in my thoughts, I heard the faded sound of the anklets’ bells.

I opened my eyes and looked at her approaching. Standing beside me, she said in a hurt voice. “I was looking for you for so long.”

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Nandani

Finding him lying there without his kurta on, and the moonlight casting a gentle glow over him, made my heart skip a few beats.

He looked distressed and tired and asked, “And how did you find me?”

Smiling weakly, I replied, “I searched everywhere, but then thought of coming to the rooftop.”

I heard from Suman about what happened in the meeting, and I could somewhat understand his pain. Sitting beside him silently, I wove my fingers through his hair, caressing his head gently.

My fingers trembled. I felt edgy because I didn't know what kind of behavior to expect from him. “Are you angry?”

Placing his head on my lap, he shook his head, “I just wanted some time alone—just me,” He muttered, closing his eyes.

His face had turned red from pain—pain that ran deeper than visible wounds. The kind of pain that’s unexplainable, only felt.

I kept brushing his hair and asked, “Did I disturb you?” I asked, my tone low.

Turning his head to me, he gazed into my eyes and softly answered, “No, you saved me.” The heaviness in his tone and the way it wavered with hoarseness told me he was hurt—very much. A lone tear swept through his eyes, and my gut wrenched just from seeing that.

Wiping it away, I asked carefully, “Are you missing your father?”

He lightly shook his head. “My mother,” He replied. “I miss her,”

“How did she look?” I asked. When he opened his eyes and gazed at the sky, I noticed how his medium lashes flickered as he looked up and how perfectly his brows arched on his high forehead. His shoulder-length hair was styled in a bun, yet a few loose strands fluttered against his face.

“She was beautiful,” he said. I slowly undid his bun to let his hair flow freely with the breeze, relieving his stress. “I don't remember much. I was just seven or maybe eight when I lost her. She had long hair like yours,” he added, his lips carved into an admiring smile as he described his mother, which made me smile. “Her smile was beautiful, and her eyes—her eyes were filled with an ocean of love. She would look at me with so much care. I would sleep just looking at her face and listening to her melodious voice,” his face lit up as he spoke of her.

I gulped a hard lump down my throat. Him recalling his mother made me miss my brother. It had been months since I had seen him. I remembered how loving and caring a gentleman he was. But I had to keep all this in my heart until everything got better.

Because no matter how much we miss someone, we must be measured with our words and maintain control over our emotions. I hoped that one day everything would be fine; that the line separating two best friends would vanish and that the distances would be washed away, just like the waves erasing the shoreline.

"Bas ek aparaadh ho gaya unse," (but she just committed one mistake.) His words brought me out of my reverie, and I swallowed, seeing his face flash with immense hurt. I could see how he was keeping himself from bursting into tears.

"And, what was that?" I asked. He had to get over it. He needed to bleed out the pain that had been consuming him—his sanity, his thoughts, and everything he did. All his deeds were stained with his mother's blood, and until his thoughts were cleansed of that old, dried blood of grief, his decisions would remain biased. They wouldn't favour the welfare of the people.

A king must not harbor a stained mind or a biased brain, and his decisions should never be swayed by personal hurt.

I saw him looking at the sky as he said it slowly.

"Ek vilaasi se prem kar bethi thi wo. Jo netra swapn dekhne se baddh the, unme swapn sajaaye the unhone. Apni samaajik sthiti se adhik asha kar li thi unhone. Daasi hote hue kisi rajkumar ki patni banne ka sapna dekh liya tha unhone," (She fell in love with a rake. Eyes that were forbidden from dreaming ended up weaving dreams. She had hoped for more than what her status in society allowed. As a maid, she dared to dream of becoming the wife of a prince.)

My throat dried up listening to his words. Every time someone started sharing their deepest stories, which differed from my own experiences, I became speechless. Yet, I wanted him to move past those painful memories once and for all. So, I remained silent, absorbing whatever he had to say.

He didn't want my opinions or any suggestions. He was capable of doing that.

My Daadisa always told me that if someone opened up to you, it wasn't because they wanted your suggestion or opinion—they just wanted to unburden their heart.

"Mol chukaaya unhone phir un sapno ka—apne jeevan se, apni swatantrata se, apni icchaoan se aur ant me apne praan se. Humein apne pita se itna prem nahi tha kyunki humaari maasa ke saath jo hua uske liye kahin na kahin sab uttardaayi the, wo bhi. Maasa ka koi dosh nahi tha. Agastya maatra do maah ka tha jab wo humein cchodkar chali gayi thi. Agastya ka koi dosh nahi tha, Ranvijay ka koi dosh nahi tha, humaara koi dosh nahi tha. Baalpan mein kuch nahi chahiye tha humein. Rajkumar hote hue bhi bandhiyoan se bhi bura durr vyavahaar hota tha humaare saath. Jinke sar dhad se alag karne the unke samaksh sar jhukaya humne. Dukh is baat ka nahi ki humaara jeevan yun kat gaya. Kintu humaari maa ko cchod diya hota. Mahadev bhi pata nahi kya Leela rachte hai. Bas maasa ko cchod dete humaare liye, hum aah bhi nahi bharte," (She paid the price for those dreams— with her life, her freedom, her desires, and in the end, with her life. I didn't love my father that much because everyone was

responsible whatever happened to my mother, he too. Maasa was not at fault. Agastya was only two months old when she passed away, so he wasn’t at fault, Ranvijay was not at fault, I wasn't at fault. I didn't want anything in my childhood. Even though we were princes, people treated us worse than prisoners. We bowed our heads before those whom I wanted to slaughter. I’m not sad that my life was cut short like this. But my mother should’ve been spared. Mahadev knows should’ve left her for us. I would not have even sighed.) he poured out his pain, with tears in his eyes.

My heart ached, and a sob left my mouth. ***“Aap roiye to mat,”*** (Please, don't cry.) I said, washing away his tears.

He suddenly looked me in the eye. “That’s why I didn’t want you to marry anyone. Because no one can understand what a woman sacrifices just because she’s a woman in this world, she will be used and then will be expected to bear everything with a stiff lip,” he said, and my chest felt heavy with his revelations. “She would be used to making babies and left with them to nurture alone. I couldn't trust anyone or let anyone come close to you. I don’t know if I love you, but I don't want you to shed even a tear, Nandani. I know I make you cry, but you fight with me, you claim your rights over me. You know your worth. Not everyone, precisely women, is like you. Not everybody can take a stand for themselves. And in this mean world, no one stood by my mother’s side,” Tears streamed down my face by the end.

“I know you can’t see me with anyone. You make me cry sometimes, I agree, but you also know how to heal me,” I said in a trembling voice, gently kissing his forehead.

He sucked in a sharp breath and asked, “Why do you love me so much, Nandani? I’m not even worthy of it. I’m your family's enemy. You know that I’m planning to kill your parents. I don't know what the future holds for me. My whole life is full of disappointments. I can’t even get over my stained past. So why do you like me?” he asked, choking on his emotions.

“Prajapati Daksh ko shivji sweekaarya nahi the. Kintu tab bhi mata sati ne keval shivji se hi prem kiya tha. Prem to aarambh mein shivji ko bhi nahi tha mata sati se, parantu jab unhone agni-kund mein atmadaah kiya to shivji poore sansar ko nasht karne par utaaru ho gaye the,” (Although King Daksha did not accept Lord Shiva, Mata Sati's love for him remained unwavering. Lord Shiva did not reciprocate her love initially, but when she sacrificed her life, he became determined to destroy the universe.) I explained.

Confused, He creased his brows, “What are you trying to say?” He asked.

Smiling weakly, I replied, “You may not be the hero for everyone, Rudra. You may not be the best, most loving, or perfect, and you may have countless flaws. But to me, you are the villain who could burn this world for me, and I’ve seen that,”

He blinked tiredly and asked, “Am I the villain of your life?”

I nodded. “Yes, you’re the villain of my life who doesn't let a single day pass without splitting my heart in two, and you are the saviour of my life who ensures I sleep every night feeling deeply and immensely loved,” I said, caressing his cheek.

It was true. Everything he did should have made me hate him. And people expected me to hate him, to punish him for his actions. I did punish him, but I couldn’t bring myself to hate him because he was both the man of my dreams and my nightmare, all at once. He was the reason for my tears, yet I still couldn't hate him.

Hate comes from expectations over reality. Somehow, we all remain familiar with reality, yet we expect. And these expectations stem from inspiration drawn from our surroundings, our imaginations, and our desires. We find such inspirations because we tend to escape reality.

However, reality is the ultimate truth; it may be painful, but that is its beauty and a sign that we are truly alive.

His truth was his past. His reality was his upbringing. His surroundings were false. His life was not perfect, and he was not the best at everything. This was the reality of my love, and I never expected more than that. That's why it never made me hate him.

I never expected anything more than reality. But if I had, I would have started noticing problems in him, in us, and eventually in our relationship. That might have one day separated us.

I didn't hold his hand to abandon him. It would be a thousand times easier to leave a suffering soul, but it would take the courage of a thousand gods to enlighten one.

His situation was very similar to that of a frog that had never seen the world outside the well in which it lived. He didn’t know what lay beyond those dark walls. To him, the well was the world. It was his truth, his everything. If anyone told him that there was a world far bigger than the well, he would laugh, never believing you.

Suddenly, he straightened himself. His face softened, and he gently touched my cheek.

“Aaj lag raha hai ki yadi ye rajpath na bhi hota, yadi grahan karne hetu bhojan na bhi hota, or keval aap hoti to ye jeeevan itna laachaar na lagta,” (Today, it feels like, even if I didn't have this throne, even if I didn't have food for two meals, as long as I had you, life wouldn’t have felt so helpless.) he said. A thousand butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and I blinked nervously.

Slowly reaching out for his wrist, I held it gently and said, “You are not yet helpless or devastated, Rudra. It's just that you're believing partial truths. The only thing you need to do now is make a decision. I won’t give you a thousand reasons why your father was wrong, and my parents were right. You’re free to do whatever

you want. If you choose to avenge your family's misery, you can do so. But remember, I am my parents' daughter first. My family comes first, then my love. Like you will choose your family over us, I too will choose mine over you."

No matter how much I loved him, I couldn't see him harming my family. It wasn't the time to portray my love or speak the truth that I knew he would never believe. It was time to determine if our feelings were mutual, if the fire burned just as intensely for us. It was time to know what he truly wanted. And whatever his decision might have been, I wouldn't have stopped loving him, but I couldn't stand on the wrong side either.

Tears blurred my vision as I said, ***"Kshan-bhan prem ka nahi hai humaara. Anant kaal ki preet hai. Ek atrupt trushna hai. Lambe samay tak dhara humaara sayyam hai. Aanewaale kal ki asha hai. Humaare swapnoan ka basera hai. Har shwaas mein aapka naam hai, har sapne mein aap hi ki cchavi hai. Humaare har kshan ki praarthana hai ye prem. Aur Ruhani ki bhaasha—urdu mein kahe to, aapke hone se humaara wajood mukammal hai, aur aapki har ek tootti saans mein humaari hazaaroan mautein hain. Aap humaare seene pe khanjar bhi rakh denge to hum aapki koi majboori samajhkar use bhi apna lenge.***

Humaare parivaar ki garima, humaara sammaan, humaare bhai ki peeda—sab haste-haste seh li humne, keval aapke liye. Kyuki hum is satya se parcihit hain ki Nandani ka Rudra ke bina koi astitva hi nahi. Hum to bane hi aapke liye hain. Humein to ye chinta tak nahi ki log humaari maasa, baapusa, bhaisa—humaare parivaar ke liye kya- kya bol rahein hain. Aapke atirik kuch dikhta jo nahi hai? Rudra ye, Rudra vo, bas Rudra... prayatna bhi kar lenge na to bhi aapko apne hruday se nahi nikaal paayenge.

Nandani mrutyu ke ghaat tak utar jaayegi, kintu aapka ya aapke parivaar ka naam apne mukh se nahi nikaalegi yadi aapne humaare parivaar ko chhot pahunchaayi to. Bahut vishaal mann hai humaare maasa-baapusa ka, tabhi to apne ek kaleje ke tukde ko apne shatru ke putra ki hateli par rakh diya. Humaare liye wo haste-haste apne praan nyocchaawar kar denge. Kintu Nandani ka mrut deh bhi aapke haath nahi aayega yadi aapne uske parviaar mein kisi ek ko bhi chotil kiya to. Prem to aapse karte rahenge hum, parantu ek shav ki tarah, Rudra," (My love for you is not momentary—it is eternal. It is the longing of a lifetime, the patience of years, a hope for tomorrow, and a home to my dreams. Your name runs through every breath of mine, and your presence is felt in my every dream. Our love is a manifestation of every second of my life. And if I speak of it in Ruhani's language—Urdu, with you now, my existence has a meaning, my life is complete, and with every skipped breath of you, I die a thousand times. If you were to pierce my chest with, I would accept it as your compulsion.

My family's dignity, my honour, my brother's pain—I will endure it all with a smile, only for you, because I know that Nandini's existence is meaningless

without Rudra. I’m made for you. I don't even worry about what people say about my parents, brother, and my family, because all I see is you. Rudra this, Rudra that, just Rudra…I’ll not be able to get you out of my heart, even if I tried.

Nandani will die, but will not let your or your family's name slip out of her mouth even if you hurt her family. My parents have big hearts, that’s why they handed over a piece of their heart in the palm of their enemy's son. They would sacrifice their lives with a smile for my happiness. But you will not get even the dead body of Nandani if you try to harm them. I will keep loving you, but you’ll only find a living corpse to love, Rudra.)

I let it all out—I had to, and as I kept speaking my heart out, his eyes filled with pain. As he gulped, I inhaled deeply, letting the tears fall freely from my eyes.

“You can avenge your father's death. Do whatever you wish. Just let me know when you plan to do so. I won’t stop you or try to make you see the wrong in your actions. I won’t speak the truth. I won’t say a word. I will just leave you to your victory and wish you the best for your future.”

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◆ Rudra ◆

Her words hung heavily in the air, trampling my heart. My chest tightened as I watched her cheeks flush while tears streamed down her face. Her eyelids swelled from all the crying.

I stared at her, trying to comprehend the emotions on her face. I wanted to speak, to make her see what I was feeling, but my words would not come out.

"Nandani…" I finally managed to say.

She blinked slowly, locking her gaze with mine. I could see a vast ocean in her eyes, deep and filled with immense love and respect for me. Yet her unwavering tone, a fierceness, a wildfire—burned on the horizon of that love, signalling that her decision was final. There was no room for negotiation.

In that silence, I felt as if the sky, the ground, the world, and everything around me faded away, as if there was nothing but her and me, with no past, no future, no expectations, no consequences—only the now, only us, staring into each other's souls.

A life without her seemed impossible. If my past was the motive of my life, she was my home. If my revenge was the mountain I had to climb, she was the base to which I would return once it was over. If my goals were the purpose of my life, then she was death—certain and inevitable. If my ambition was to kill her parents, then she was the water I would drink after the pursuit.

She was the solace I sought after achieving anything in my life. And if I had never found that solace—the water to quench my thirst, the base of the mountain to rest, the silence, the relief to calm my mind, the home to return to—what would be the point of living? What would be the point of conquering that mountain? What would be the purpose of aiming that arrow, or of life itself without death? What would be the point of that motive, and what would be the point of becoming Rana Rudra Dev Singh if there was no Queen Nandani by his side?

She was everything. And without her, nothing mattered.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I felt my heartbeat slow. My voice trembled and became hoarse as I whispered, ***"Nandani, aap to humse humaare jeevan ke badle humaare jeene ki aas hi maang rahi hai, humse humaare jeene ka uddeshya maang rahin hai. Aap to humse humaare mata-pita ko hi cchodne ko keh rahin hai,"*** (Nandani, you are asking me for the hope of living in exchange for my life, the purpose of my life. You are asking me to leave my parents behind.)

She lowered her gaze, and I noticed a few strands of her hair flowing in the wind. Another tear fell from her eye, trailing down and finally resting on her collarbones. She sobbed softly, lifting her eyes back to me.

"Humne to aapke liye pehle hi apne jeene ki asha cchoddi thi, Rudra. Humne to pehle hi apne jeevan ka uddeshya, apne mata-pita ko aapke liye chod diya. Jis

din humne aapke kaksh mein paanv dhare, ye jaante hue ki aap humaare shatru ke putra hai, humne apne maasa aur baapusa ko daga de di," (I have already given up on my hope of survival for you, Rudra. I have already left my life's purpose, my parents, for you. The day I stepped into your chamber, even though you're the son of our enemy, I betrayed my parents.) She spoke through tears, her voice dripped with extreme sorrow.

I instantly turned my eyes south and took her shivering hands in mine. With every drop of her tears and each word spoken, my heart felt as if it slowed down under the intense pressure of our reality.

I was at a loss for words, unsure of what I truly wanted or what to expect. My mind couldn't make sense of everything happening around me.

"Humein maatra aap chaahiye, Nandani. Keval aap; aur kuch nahi," (I just want you, Nandani. Only you; nothing else.) I said, bringing her hand close to my lips and gently kissing the back of her hand.

I closed my eyes briefly, sinking into her touch and fragrance, letting her energy wash over all my doubts, and feeling a sense of peace inside my body.

"Hum to aap hi ke hain, Rudra," (I am all yours, Rudra.) She said, and I opened my eyes to look at her. ***"Bas aisa kuch na kariyega jo humein jeete ji maarde,"*** (But don't do something that would make me a living corpse.) She whispered agonisingly.

I quickly shook my head and watched her close her eyes, allowing the tears to spill down her cheeks. She gently rested her head against my chest as I wrapped my arms around her.

An instant wave of relaxation washed over me as I felt her warmth, melting away my inner turmoil. I felt ecstatic as tears streamed down my cheeks.

Love had always been the feeling I despised most in my life. It was the first thing I hated because it caused my mother so much suffering. She had been content before she loved, and the irony was that love was neither happiness nor pain. It was both the remedy and the wound itself. It was the sword that tore her apart, yet she did not bleed, not a single drop. It is something that gradually kills you, piece by piece, yet somehow, you find salvation in the end.

I hated this love the most. It makes us weak, distracts us, conquers us, changes us, and destroys us. But if she was love, she was that weakness, that distraction, the conqueror, the change, the destroyer. Then for me, love was beautiful, love was euphoric, love was peace, love was bliss, love was that shine in the night, love was that spark that tells you that you are alive, love was that fire, love was the flame that burns you. Love was something that kept every bit of me together from falling apart, from destroying myself, from burning my soul.

And then I thought I finally understood what my mother must have felt when she fell in love with my father. Recalling her, I realized how much she had sacrificed for him—the risks she took, the care she gave him.

But I wasn’t my father. I wasn’t the man I had resented the most. I couldn’t be the one who failed to answer her love with my own. I could never be the one to hurt her the way my father had hurt my mother. Never.

I took a deep breath. She was right—I had to make a choice. I had to set things right. Suddenly, she pulled away and looked at me.

Her lips were swollen, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes were wet, the redness blurring her gaze.

“Humein chalna chahiye. Aap vishraam kijiye,” (I should go now. You take a rest.)

She moved to stand, but I quickly grasped her wrist. The sound of her bangles and anklets shattered the silence, and she softly lowered her gaze to meet mine. Our eyes locked, and a heavy silence lingered until I gathered the courage to speak.

“Ruk jaaiye, Nandani. Humaare paas. Ek raatri, keval hum dono, bina kisi asmanjas ke,” (Stay, Nandani, with me, a night, just us, alone, without anything else.)

Tilting her head slightly, she quietly muttered, ***“Aap pachtaayenge kal yadi hum aaj ruk gaye to,”*** (You will regret tomorrow if I’d stay tonight.)

I shook my head. ***“Aapke saath har kshan mein trupti hai, pachtawa nahi,”*** (Every moment with you is heaven for me, not regret). I spoke lowly.

She inhaled deeply before sitting back before me.

She blinked in uncertainty, nipping at her lower lip. I couldn't stop myself from freeing her lower lip with my thumb to prevent her from torturing it. “Don't do that, it will bleed.”

She lifted her gaze to meet mine. Slowly, she brought her finger to my cheek, gently caressing my tear-streaked face. “Don't do that,” she whispered. “It bleeds my heart.”

My eyes held hers, tracing the moisture on her lashes. Her pupils appeared darker and more prominent than before. The moonlight cascading over her face made her look like a serene river flowing beneath a blanket of stars.

Unknowingly, my hand moved from her chin to her cheek, gently cupping her face. I felt the subtle shift in her features as I touched her skin—the slight shiver, the change in warmth, the quickening of her heartbeat, the uneven breathing, and the parting of her lips. Her eyes softened, drawing me deeper into her—her scent, her warmth, her embrace. So deep that my mind ceased to think of anything else.

I watched her closely as the distance between our faces narrowed, her features drawing nearer and her eyes blinking softly. The sound of our breathing gradually became audible, the sensation of her breath brushing against my face.

My fingers instinctively moved through her hair as her face tilted back, and mine dipped closer. Her eyes closed, her breath quickening, her lips trembling, wet with anticipation. Without thinking, I moved closer, my nose grazing the side of her cheek, inhaling her scent, feeling her surrender to the touch.

The sound of her breath grew louder, blocking every other noise. The heat from our intimacy shut the wind blowing over my body, and her loud heartbeats made me lose track of my heart’s rhythm.

There was only a pull, an endless horizon, a clarity that felt like an empty grassland—no rushing, no winds, no chaos, no birds. Just silence. Peace. Love. And then a touch. The softness of her lips on mine, a euphoric wave of ecstasy sweeping over me. The kiss was slow, gentle, yet overwhelmingly intense—like the warmth of the sun, the softness of water, the peace of an empty field, and the calm of a dream.

Shunned breathing, pounding heartbeats, waves of sensations, and chills ran down my spine and moved up to my head, making me feel sparks in my mind and leaving an oozing brain.

I could feel the wetness, the warmth, the softness, the sweetness, the trembling of her lips under mine. I felt a strong shiver from her, a soft moan and a slight pull when I couldn't stop myself from sucking her lips intensely, slowly driving it into a deeper place.

My lips moved against hers with passionate urgency, tasting and devouring her lips. My lashes shut on their own, the warmth of her lips making me forget everything. I felt lost in her.

My breathing hitched as she pulled her lips an inch away. Our noses touched each other, breathing fanning over each other's faces. Yet the mere separation killed me. It felt as if someone pulled my heart out of my body, as if blood stopped flowing through my veins.

It was so different yet so familiar. It was so killing yet so breathtaking. Punishing yet rewarding.

My hand was wound around her nape, keeping her in place, not letting her go away, not even an inch, not even for a moment, and I leaned closer to her. She inched backwards, trying to look into my eyes.

Her brows knitted together, and she looked straight into my eyes. Her tender gaze was confused, yet committed.

My eyes often drifted back and forth between her eyes and her lips, wanting to touch them, taste them, claim them, but she kept trying to move away. And I didn't even realise when her head sank into the pillow, and I found myself hovering over her.

Her pale skin glowed softly in the moonlight, while her silky hair shimmered brightly. Her collarbones, jawline, and slender neck—everything about her was perfect and exquisite.

“Rudra,” she called slowly, her voice feeling like a gentle breeze, a feathery touch.

“Hnnn-hnnn,” I hummed, distracted by her. She gulped, looking into my eyes with the same intensity. She brought her hand close to my cheek, touching my

cheek softly with her fingers.

A cold breeze suddenly hit, and she shivered lightly.

“Thand badh rahi hai,” (It's getting colder.) She said, and I straightened myself, pulling the comforter up. Covering both of us, I lay beside her, pushing my hand under her head, and she immediately scooted closer to me.

Placing her head over my chest, she wrapped her arm around my torso. I gently touched her hair, which was spread aside, and saw her closing her eyes. Leaning in a little, I kissed her hair.

I didn't know what I had to do. On the one hand, she and her love were demanding an answer from me, and on the other, there were the memories of my mother and a list of people who deserved what my mother went through.

Justice was needed, but the price was love.

“Suniye,” (Listen,) she said slowly, angling her face to look at me.

“Kahiye,” (Tell me,) I asked.

She pursed her lips nervously for a moment, and then spoke, ***“Vivah ke baad humaari pehli holi hai. Maasa ne sandesh bheja hai aur humein aamantrit kiya hai aapke saath. Kanya ki pehli holi uske peehar mein manaayi jaati hai na. To aap to aaenge nahi kyuki yaahaan ateethi aaye hue hain. To hum vichaar kar rahe the, ki hum hokar aa jaayein akele. Pehle hi bata rahe hai kyuki aap krodhit ho jaate hai jab hum kahin akele jaane ka sochte hai to,”*** (It's my first Holi after our wedding. My mother sent a letter, inviting us both to celebrate. Because the first Holi of a newly wedded girl is celebrated in her maternal home. So, I was thinking of going alone, since you will not come due to the guests in the empire. I’m telling you in advance because you get angry if I even think of going alone.) She finished and looked at me.

Her information twisted my gut firmly. I didn't want her to go, leaving me alone even for a single day, nor did I want to go there. I, at least, needed time.

Was she trying to leave me already? What if she were going there and never coming back?

“When will you come back?” I asked instantly. She shook her head lightly and replied in an admiring voice.

“Jab bhi aap hume lene aayenege,” (Whenever you'll come to take me back.)

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I studied his face, waiting for his answer. But as he continued to stare at mine, a heavy silence settled in, revealing his inner anguish.

"Hum to uphaas kar rahein hain. Humein gyaat hai ki aapki yahaan adhik awashyakta hai," (I'm just kidding. I know your presence is needed here more.) I said, not wanting him to be distressed about it, and I closed my eyes, pressing my cheek against his chest again.

No more words were exchanged. It was just us—him and me. Alone, without anything else. Without the past or the future. Without certainty, without change. Without fear, without pain. Without happiness. Without anything. Just us. And peace.

As my ear rested against his chest, I could hear the steady rhythm of his heart beating. His chest rose and fell slowly with every breath. It felt like a song, a quiet melody that filled me with peace, love, and calm. How easy it was to survive—just inhale and exhale—but how tragic it was to live.

I didn't know if I had really lived in that moment for the past few months—or perhaps years—that led up to it, or if any of it counted as living.

But maybe in the future, when I look back and see what we went through together, with each other, against each other, having each other, or maybe not having each other, it would be worth calling a life.

A life I was undeniably and wholeheartedly living with him; no regrets.

I didn't know if we would end up together or if there would be a tomorrow for us. But I was certain there would be a name, a story, a saga—something to remember, cherish, retell, and recall.

The saga of us. The saga of Rudra Nandani.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring—for me, for him, for us. I didn't know when or how we would be separated—maybe for the better, though not for us. Maybe for him. Maybe for the sake of being who we were, individually.

"When will you leave?" His voice suddenly pulled me out of the chain of my thoughts.

"Tomorrow," I answered, tracing slow circles on his chest.

I closed my eyes again, letting his warmth soothe me. Faint images flickered in my mind—us celebrating Holi together. A memory, or maybe just a dream, before I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up to the sunlight trying to penetrate my vision. They felt heavy as I tried to open my lashes, making me squint against the brightness. I drew in a sharp breath from the discomfort.

When I grew more aware, I felt his heavy hand resting on my waist. My back was pressed to his chest, and his chin rested atop my head.

My eyes flew open when I realised we had overslept.

I tried to turn, but it was impossible under his weight. Still, I called him in a slow but urgent voice. ***"Rudra, savera ho gaya hai. Uthiye, sab aapki prateeksha kar rahe honge,"*** (Rudra, wake up. It's morning already, everyone must be waiting for you.)

He inhaled deeply at the sound of my voice, and then, without a word, he pulled me even closer to him. His broad palm rested firmly against my chest as he drew me into him, still lost in a deep sleep. Beneath the comforter, I felt his feet brush against mine. My lips parted instinctively at the sudden contact.

What the hell was he doing?

But then, what he did next twisted my stomach, sending a chill racing down my spine.

His hand moved up, fingertips grazing along my skin, until it gently—yet firmly—cupped the side of my neck. I could feel his grip tighten, and a soft gasp escaped my lips.

Then, all at once, he turned me toward him.

Was this man getting turned on in the morning?

My eyes flew open, locking onto his face. He still looked dizzy with sleep, his eyelids tinted red at the corners. His hair was messy, curls falling in every direction, and I could tell he hadn't slept so deeply in a long time.

The warm orange hues of the morning sunlight spilt across his face, making his features glow softly.

In a quiet voice, I said, ***"Uth jaaiye. Sab dhoondh rahe honge hum dono ko,"*** (Get up, they might be searching for us.)

I was feeling nervous… and undeniably aroused. I had never seen him like this before.

He was silent, yes, but his eyes were loud, speaking a language I could understand.

His thumb traced slow, deliberate circles on the side of my neck, making my heart race. I could feel what he wanted. I could see the need and dangerous desire dancing in his eyes. His touch was more than a caress—more sensual.

A dangerous kind of desire flickered in his gaze, intense and raw. His sensual touch carried a hunger I hadn't seen before.

I lowered my eyes, trying to bring him back to reality, trying to pull us both back. That's when I saw it. My waist chain… looped loosely around his wrist.

My breath hitched at the sight, and memories of that night came flooding back, hitting me like a wave.

He slowly leaned in, his lips just inches away, and my pulse thundered in my ears.

A small, timid smile tugged at the corner of my lips. I lifted my hand and gently pressed my palm to his cheek, nudging him away playfully, but trembling inside.

"Humaare lautne ki prateeksha kijiyega aap, jaise hum kar rahe the aapki do varshoan tak," (Wait for me till I come back like I waited for you for two years.) I teased him, trying to sit, but he immediately pulled me back, and my palms landed on his chest.

Looking intensely into my eyes, he asked, ***"Aap do varshoan ke liye peehar jaa rahin hain?"*** (You're going for two years?)

I could already see the tension and unease on his face at the news.

Playing a little, I gave a slight nod and muttered slowly, ***"kadachit usse adhik... Ab aap to humaari god bhar nahi sakte, to tab tak hum wahi reh lenge. Yahaan aane ka kya laabh?"*** (Maybe more than that... Now that you can't make babies with me, what's the point of being here with you? I'll stay there and enjoy it.) I said it, and he immediately fisted my hair, pulling me closer to him.

"Kya kaha aapne?" (What did you say?) I smiled teasingly and murmured slowly, looking deep into his eyes. ***"Wahi jo aapne suna,"*** (I said what you heard.)

And suddenly, he turned me beneath him, hovering over me with a dangerous closeness.

His face was so near, it blocked out everything else from my view. I just stared blankly into his eyes as he said, ***"Bahut bolne lagi hai aap?"*** (You talk too much.)

I smiled, meeting his gaze with the same intensity, and replied slowly, ***"To chup kara dijiye humein,"*** (So shut me up,)

He stared blankly at my face. I watched his pupils shift—his gaze slowly drifting from my eyes to my lips. A faint, sly smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he leaned close to my ear.

My head tilted slightly, and a shiver ran down my spine when he whispered, "Better not choke when I would." I instantly pushed him away and sat upright, my heart pounding wildly as I processed what he meant.

"Hahahaha," He chuckled warmly. "After all, you have such a slender neck," he added, still in that teasing tone. I couldn't even describe how flushed and timid I felt at that moment.

I gave his chest a light slap and muttered, "Rudra!" That only made him laugh harder. I stood up and adjusted my dupatta.

"Humein samay par nikalna hai, aapne to aaj avkaash le rakha hai kaam se kadachit," (I need to leave on time, you seem like you've taken a day off from work,) I said, and he stopped me, holding my wrist.

I turned my gaze to him. He was lying on the mattress, his hand gripping mine firmly, his eyes filled with love.

A quiet silence followed as I tried to make sense of the look in his eyes. When, in a slow voice, he said, ***"Nandani ke bina Rudra bhi kuch nahi... aapki tarah hum apni bhavnaon ko aksharoan ki maala mein piro to nahi sakte, parantu aag***

dono taraf barabar lagi hai,” (There is no Rudra either without Nandani... unlike you, I can't put my emotions into words, but the feelings are mutual.) he spoke, and his words made my heart feel heavy.

The memories from last night surfaced in my mind, and I lowered my gaze.

I couldn’t say anything—not after reaching the finish line of my thoughts, not after saying more than I should have, not after making everything so clear.

I looked up again when I felt him intertwine our fingers. He sat up slowly and brought the back of my hand to his lips, kissing it lovingly.

“Wear yellow, little sunflower,” he said. A wide smile spread across my face when I heard him call me little again.

He smiled too, and I gently pulled my hand away.

“Humein vilamb ho raha hai, Ranaji,” (I’m getting late, Ranaji,)

I said nothing more and walked off, adjusting my dupatta over my head as I stepped down from the terrace to return to the chamber.

“Where the hell were you? I looked for you everywhere!” Suman’s voice hit me the moment I entered. Her brows were drawn together, and she scanned me from head to toe. “Wait,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

She circled around me in suspicion, studying me from every angle. “Are you having an affair with someone?” she asked, stepping closer with wide eyes. “Why does it look like you slept with someone? And where were you last night, Nandani? You know Ranaji will lose it if he finds out. You should’ve told me. What if someone had asked about you? What would I have said?” She blurted out in a mix of panic and frustration. And as I looked into her eyes, I could see genuine concern and sadness.

I furrowed my brows slightly, seeing how worried she looked, and replied jokingly, “Yes, I went to meet my lover.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “What???” she squeaked in sheer fear. I simply nodded and continued walking into the chamber, ignoring her. She hurried after me.

“Nandani, Ranaji will be furious! He’ll kill me first, and then you!” I stopped and turned to her with a pleasant smile.

“He won’t. Don’t worry. He’ll never find out about my affair.” Her eyes grew even wider as she stepped closer, whispering, “Nandani, you love him. Remember?”

I raised an eyebrow, pretending to think. “Do I?” Her face turned pale with panic.

She shook her head slowly. “No, Nandani…” she murmured, scared.

I couldn’t hold it in any longer and burst into laughter. “Suman, I was with him,” She stared at me, agape, looking like she couldn’t believe what she heard. I kept laughing, and she gave me an upset look.

“I was really worried! I didn’t even sleep properly last night,” she said, frowning.

Softening, I reached out and said gently, “Come here.” I pulled her into a warm, tight hug. “I’ll keep it in mind next time,” I whispered.

She smiled. “Okay, but I’m still dying to know what happened,” she said. I released the hug and looked at her with a playful grin.

She looked back curiously, and I asked, “Really?”

She chuckled deeply, and I smiled along with her.

“By the way,” I said, “we must leave for Mahabaleshgarh. I’m going to take a bath—get ready while I do,”

Her eyes lit up. “Really?” she asked eagerly, and I nodded.

She hugged me tightly, excited. “Let me go pack my things!” she said, and I chuckled deeply as she rushed off.

I walked into the bathroom and took a quick bath. After which, I walked to the dressing room and wore a yellow lehenga as my dear husband demanded. I let my wet hair air dry while I was wearing my jewellery.

My lips hummed a tune on their own as I got ready. I didn’t know why, but I felt so excited to see my parents, my Daadisa, and everyone else back home.

“Ho gayi taiyaar?” (You ready?)

I shivered at the sudden voice and turned to see him stepping into the dressing room. He seemed to have bathed because he was dressed in a maroon outfit with an overcoat draped over it.

A slight smile appeared on my face, but the next moment, my heart began to race as I watched him quietly close the door behind him. Not just close, but he locked it with his eyes fixed on mine.

I blinked, a bit nervous, and lowered my gaze, asking softly, “Why are you locking the door?”

He walked toward me, each step slow and deliberate, his eyes never leaving mine.

My brows drew together slightly in confusion, and I looked up into his eyes as he stopped right in front of me.

“Aap chaahti hai ki hum aapke saath Holi manaye?” (Do you want me to celebrate Holi with you?) He spoke in a deep, sensual voice, and I blinked, feeling butterflies flutter in my stomach.

“Kaun patni nahi chaahegi ki unke pati unhe rang lagaye?” (Which wife wouldn't want her husband to colour her?) I asked, then lowered my gaze to my arm as he trailed his finger along it, from where my bangles ended to the bare skin above.

Cold water droplets still clung to my collarbones, dripping down, and I lifted my gaze again when he spoke softly, deliberately. “Then you’ll have to wear this for me. It’s your Holi gift.”

I frowned slightly, puzzled by his words. He brought his other hand forward, revealing something resting in his palm. My eyes shifted to it in confusion.

It was a finely carved gold ornament—an oval about the length of my thumb, smooth-edged and shining. On its end, a delicate gold chain was attached, and to its end was a small, plain golden ring.

“What is it? A ring?” I asked, still unsure, as I took it in my hand and tried slipping the ring onto my finger. “But this ball will hang like this?” I examined, feeling the slight weight of the object. “It is weird,” I said, and he took it back from my hand.

“Turn around,” he said, and I confusedly looked at him.

“Is it meant to be worn in the hair?” I asked as I turned, catching the faint smile on his face in the mirror.

He gently pushed my damp hair over my shoulder and said, “Bend forward, hands on the table.”

I narrowed my brows, still unsure. “So... you're going to tie it in the strings of my blouse?” I asked.

He let out a deep chuckle when I saw him take the ornament into his mouth. He guided me forward with his hand and leaned in, hovering over me. My eyes met his intense and unreadable gaze in the mirror.

My heartbeat picked up in a rush when I felt his hand at the hem of my skirt. He wrapped one arm around my waist, drawing me in closer, lifting the fabric slightly with the other. I caught a glimpse of the ornament again as he took it from his mouth. At that moment, I began to understand what it was truly for.

“Happy Holi, little seductress,” he whispered, and my cheeks flushed hot.

He reached beneath the layers of my skirt, closer to my thighs. I could barely breathe from the flurry of feelings swirling inside me.

“Isn't it... Too big for me?” I asked quietly, flustered.

He kissed my cheek and replied with a smile, “It's the smallest one—and just right for you.” Then, leaning closer, he whispered in my ear, “Wait for me. I’ll be back soon. And until then, don’t you dare take it off,”

A shiver ran through me. I lowered my gaze to the table's surface, completely flushed.

“Widen your legs a little, little wife,” he murmured, his warm breath fanning against my ear.

His fingertips reached on my inner thigh, feathering it, making me shudder. I rose slightly onto my toes, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensation.

“Ahhmm…” I exhaled shakily, trying to steady myself as his touch sent ripples through my skin.

“Relax,” he slowly stroked my core and murmured in a sensual tone near my ear. “Calm down,”

I bit my lower lip, my lashes forced closed, and my lips parted when I felt the cold touch of the metal against my sensitive flesh. It felt extremely foreign to my body, yet incredibly smooth.

“Easy, little bird,” he muttered, slowly sliding it into me. And in one swift push, it was inside me.

“Aaahhhh….” A moment of pain stung me with a rush of sensations. It felt uneasy and cold inside me.

He pushed it deeper inside with his finger, and I felt my flesh adjusting to it, clenching it in its hold. “Ahhhhh,”

“Does it hurt?” He asked, and I blinked, feeling warmth oozing in my body with waves of cold sensations passing occasionally. It was in me, deep inside. And I shook my head lightly at the presence of it.

It wasn’t pain that I was feeling—It was something else. Something I didn’t have the words for.

He gently caressed my core and lowered my skirt. The gold chain and the ring attached to it brushed against my inner thigh, a soft weight that made my breath hitch.

He straightened, but somehow, my focus narrowed to that one spot where the sensation lingered, pulsing inside me.

I, too, stood straight and glanced at my reflection in the mirror. My face was flushed deep pink, and my slightly parted lips were darker than usual.

“How does it feel?” he asked. I drew a slow breath, biting my lower lip to calm my racing heartbeat. I shifted a little, testing the sensation, and a shy smile etched over my face.

“Hard,” I whispered. He chuckled, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“You’ll get used to it in some time,” he murmured against my ear.

I swallowed nervously. “Sometime? What do you mean by sometime? How long is that?” I asked quickly, my voice barely above a whisper. And as I breathed in to say more, it struck me—sharp and unexpected. “Ahhhh…”

I clamped my mouth shut, wide-eyed, staring at him as a rush of heat swept through me.

It felt… good. Far too good.

I was caught between disbelief and desire, wondering how something that felt so wrong in thought could feel so right in reality.

Even the slightest of movements sent a shiver down my spine. I felt... flustered, breathless.

Aroused.

I remembered one of the seduction lessons about intimate ornaments. My master had said that a couple might use such things to heighten their pleasure and explore new angles of intimacy. But it required immense trust and patience.

I looked down, blinking nervously. “Where did you get it from?” I asked in a hushed voice.

He smiled, meeting my eyes through the mirror, and leaned closer to my ear. “I have so many gifts for you, little seductress,” he whispered.

Just those words made a thousand butterflies flapping their wings in my stomach.

It felt alluringly secretive, like something only we knew—intimidating yet thrilling. I was aroused in ways I couldn’t name, and it was killing me already.

We stayed silent for a while until I managed to calm myself and looked back into his eyes.

I knew I’d be needing him soon. ***“Jaldi aayiega.”*** (Please come soon.)

I spoke in a slow voice and closed my eyes for a moment, letting myself feel the warmth of his touch against my back.

We stood still, simply staring into each other’s eyes through the mirror. He scanned me from top to bottom, taking in every detail of my appearance. Without a word, he leaned forward and reached for the tiny vermilion bottle placed on the table.

A small, timid smile touched my lips as he took a pinch between his fingers and gently filled the empty partition of my hair. “Mine,” he said softly.

I turned to look at him, and the moment I moved, a wave of sensation rushed down my spine, making a quiet moan escape me. “Ahh…”

I quickly grabbed his hand to steady myself.

I felt like I'd lost all my words, and my heart raced, my mind spun, and my breathing was uneven.

He smiled devilishly at my reaction and leaned in to peck my cheek. “Now, you're glowing,” he said, and I blinked timidly.

I just had to endure it until he came… but it already had me on an edge. I felt weak and full, overflowing with sensation.

“Will I feel like this until you take it out?” I stammered, my voice caught in my throat, barely making it out through the tightness building inside me, due to my throbbing core.

He gently brushed my cheek with his fingertips. “You’ll know soon enough,” he murmured.

I blinked, still dazed, when suddenly, a loud knock on the door startled me.

I stepped away from him quickly, straightening my clothes and grabbing my dupatta. I covered my head and gave myself one last look in the mirror.

“Yes?” he called out.

A voice came from the other side of the door. “Ranaji, Prince Agastya has come to meet Ranisa,” the lady attendant informed.

He frowned and replied curtly, “Okay.”

“What is he doing here?” he muttered under his breath and walked to open the door.

I bit back a smile, catching a flicker of jealousy in his eyes, and followed behind him. With each step I took, a thousand sensations coursed through my body, making me abruptly slow my pace. He turned to glance at me once before opening the door.

I was aching to touch myself, craving a release. Still, strangely, I felt… good. He chuckled, catching my struggle, and I shot him an annoyed glare.

“You’ll pay for this,” I grumbled, stepping slowly toward the door.

As I adjusted my dupatta, he gently took my hand. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed it softly, then suddenly pulled me close, sneaking his arm around my waist.

“Ahhh,” a soft gasp escaped me as a jolt of current ran through my body. My eyes widened.

“Ayeee,” I couldn’t help the reaction. It was clear he’d done it deliberately. And he just smiled, definitely enjoying himself.

“I don’t want you to forget me for even a single moment… little sunflower,” he whispered, giving a quick lick to my earlobe, making me jump into my place.

He lifted me slightly, cupping my cheek with his free hand, and leaning in, brushed his lips against mine.

He kissed me deeply, intensely. I rose onto my toes, giving in. His lips moved against mine, slowly, sucking gently with intense passion.

In just a few moments, I was aroused—completely undone.

He pulled back slowly, and I blinked, shivering, feeling the sensations still dance across my skin. Smiling, he placed a light kiss on my forehead.

Inhaling deeply, I pushed him back a little and cleared my throat. “I’m getting late,” I said softly.

We both walked out to meet Agastya.

“Bhabhi-sa,” Agastya greeted, his face lighting up with an excited smile. But it vanished the moment his eyes landed on him.

“Why the hell is he always behind you?” Agastya muttered under his breath, and Rudra shot a glare his way. And I couldn’t help but chuckle softly.

Turning my attention back to Prince Agastya, ***“Ji, devarsa, aaiye,”*** (Devarsa, welcome.) I greeted him, trying to sound as normal as possible.

He furrowed his brows and asked, “Are you okay?” and my cheeks instantly flushed even deeper.

I glanced abruptly at my husband, wondering if he knew… Did he know?

“Wh… What… Why? Yes… I am…” I blinked nervously. “I’m okay,” I managed to say, even though I felt anything but okay.

It was overwhelming—all those lingering sensations. It felt like I was being pleasured, right in front of everyone.

Suddenly, Rudra stepped closer and placed his hand on my shoulder. I lowered my gaze for a moment. “She’s just feeling a little nervous,” he said easily. “It’s her first Holi after marriage, and she’s going to her family home.”

Agastya’s face lit up immediately. “Ohh, wonderful! Then we should come along too, to celebrate and meet your family. It’s the festival, after all!”

I smiled widely, and another wave of sensation hit me, but I quickly masked it.

“Yes… Yes, please do. My parents will be so happy to meet you, especially my grandmother. She’s very funny and cute,” I said, trying to match his excitement.

But all our excitement went down the drain when he said, “Agastya, you have a lot of work today. Don’t forget, we’re expecting guests.”

Agastya’s smile dropped, and he looked at me apologetically. “Sorry, Bhabhisa. Maybe we can find time tomorrow for a proper celebration.”

I smiled, hiding my disappointment. Turning to him, I muttered slowly, ***“Aap, aur humaare dono devar yadi saath chalenge, to humein bahut accha lagega, Ranaji,”*** (If you and both my brothers-in-law come along, I’ll feel immensely delighted, Ranaji.) He stared at me blankly, then looked toward Agastya.

“You talk to her. I have to meet Ranvijay,” he said, smiling briefly. Then his eyes met mine. “I’ll meet you outside in a little while.”

I nodded, and he walked away, leaving us alone.

Agastya moved to the couch. ***“Ji, Bhabhisa, kahiye. Usse poorv aap baithiye.”*** (Yes, Bhabhisa, tell me—and first, please take a seat.)

I smiled and walked over to sit beside him, but the moment I tried to sit, I instantly stood up again.

“Ahhhh…” A soft, embarrassing cry escaped my lips as a sharp sensation shot down my body.

Agastya stood up quickly, eyes filled with concern. “Are you okay? What happened?”

I inhaled deeply and forced a smile. “Ye… yes, umm… my back is hurting a little. I… I slipped. On the stairs,” I blabbered whatever, and he looked at me, puzzled but concerned.

“Oh… slipped on the stairs?” he repeated slowly.

I nodded quickly. “Yes! I was… dancing, I mean, walking carefully in my bedroom. And I slipped on the stairs.”

His brows knitted together in uncertainty. “You were walking in your bedroom… and slipped on the stairs?” I nodded again without thinking—then froze.

Wait. What? There are no stairs in my bedroom. My brain screamed at me, but it was too late.

This was the result of what my husband had done to me. The way he had pushed me to the edge, the sensual madness.

Now, I was out here, flustered, aching, and trying to act normal, like being naked but hidden.

Agastya laughed softly. “Alright, alright. Just stay standing then. Tell me, why did you call me?”

I gulped, blinking nervously, and nodded. “Yes, I collected all my extra ornaments and assets yesterday,” I said. “I even had them sent to your chamber. I want you to count them and let me know how much more we’ll need for the reconstruction on the outskirts of the kingdom.”

He looked at me and nodded. “Sure. As soon as the guests leave, I’ll get started.”

I nodded in return, and we spoke a little more about the plans and the time until an attendee arrived with a message.

“Ranisa, Ranaji has called for you. He says you should leave on time to reach before sunset.” Giving her a nod, I called out for Suman and Reva.

“I should leave too,” Agastya said, rising. “Hopefully, we’ll meet again soon, when we’ll be free,”

I smiled softly. “Ji.”

Suman and Reva came with the other attendants, and I turned to them. “Everything’s ready? Shall we go?”

They nodded, and Agastya added, “Let me walk you to the main entrance.” I nodded again, and we began walking.

With every step, I felt the slow ache. The fire built in hadn’t cooled since morning. The sensations pulsed through me, my body betraying me with its need. I was already wet, longing for even the smallest touch of his hand, just one caress.

I saw him waiting near the palanquin. Before stepping out, I lowered my veil just enough to cover my face to my nose. My eyes lifted to see the palanquin, the attendants, the full convoy ready and waiting.

As I moved forward, he extended his hand toward me.

I inhaled deeply and placed my hand in his.

We walked toward the palanquin together in silence. Neither of us said a word. I was caught in a storm of nervousness, arousal, and anticipation.

But what lingered in the back of my mind was a quiet, burning question: How long will this slow fire last? How will it end?

We finally stopped before the palanquin.

“You’re getting late,” he said softly. I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the weight of many eyes on us.

But I couldn’t stop leaning forward and pressing my forehead gently against his chest. My arm curled around his waist as I muttered under my breath, only for him to hear. ***“Sheegra aayiega, nahi to ye humaare praan har lega,”*** (Please come soon, Rudra, otherwise I will get killed with this.) He patted my shoulder and leaned in to kiss my head.

"Dhairya rakhiye, phal meetha hoga," (The fruit of patience is always sweet, Ranisa.) I closed my eyes and smiled.

Taking a step away from him, I carefully lowered myself into the palanquin.

"Ahh…" A soft, breathless gasp escaped my lips as I settled in.

The moment I sat, I felt the plushness of a cottony mattress beneath me that brought instant comfort. But the moment of relief was short-lived when a fresh wave of sensation surged through me, deep in my body. I shifted slightly, trying to adjust.

Suman climbed in after and sat across from me. "What happened? Are you okay?" she asked. I nodded quickly.

"Why?" I asked, trying to sound as normal as possible.

My lips parted as I breathed heavily, trying to collect myself and adapt to the unbearable heat simmering inside me. The sensations were slowly fading, and I sat back, finding little to no relief.

Suman tilted her head. "You look… high and dry," she teased, arching her brow.

I was baffled and felt my face flush.

"What? No—" I said quickly, gulping, and tried to shift my focus elsewhere. I placed my hands in my lap, thighs pressed together, which made it worse. The friction and tension drove me mad.

I concentrated on my breathing as the palanquin finally began to move. But with the first few steps, I realised just how cruel this ride would be.

Each lift and drop of the palanquin sent tiny jolts of pleasure through me, and the uneven path beneath us only intensified them.

"Ahh…" I bit my lower lip, squeezing my eyes.

"Nandani," Suman's voice cut through the haze. I opened my eyes slowly and looked at her, her expression one of confusion and slight disgust. "What are you doing? You're acting… weird," she said.

I took a deep breath, grounding myself. "Oh, Suman… please, not now," I whispered in a strained voice.

I closed my eyes again, surrendering to the torture that refused to stop. It was as if he were still there, as if he was teasing me, touching me, without laying a single hand. My body was burning slowly from within. And I didn't know how long I'd last.

"Nandani, what are you doing?" I opened my eyes with slightly parted lips and met her gaze. My breath came out in a shaky gasp as I tried to calm myself. I took a few deep, long inhales to suppress the intensity of the sensations, which began to dull. Sitting had helped. I was getting used to it—barely.

Suman was still watching me with a puzzled expression.

"My back is hurting," I finally said, hoping she'd buy it.

Her face softened, and then suddenly, she grinned. "Ohh, for a moment, I thought you were possessed." She burst into laughter. "I was ready to run, seeing

the spirit take over you!”

“Hahahaha,” she laughed louder, clutching her stomach.

I let out a quiet chuckle, mumbling under my breath, “Crazy.” She smiled at me, but just then, the palanquin jerked slightly on the uneven road.

“Ahhhmmmmm…” A soft cry slipped past my lips before I could stop. Suman looked at me again, dubiously.

“Rudra…” I whispered to myself, unable to hide the longing in my voice. Then came the question I wasn’t ready for.

“Are you sore down there?” she asked, her voice low and full of implication. My eyes widened as a cold shiver ran down my spine.

“What? No!” I said quickly, very quickly. She tilted her head, unconvinced. “I’m sleeping,” I said and shut my eyes.

I couldn’t talk to anyone in that state. It was torture, pure torture. And it hadn’t been even the slightest of a long time, and I was already missing him.

The thing that he had inserted into me was surely working, making me feel thousands of things, and aroused at the wrong times.

We kept moving, and I felt deep shivers crawling up my spine every time the palanquin swayed even a bit.

And with every step forward, I felt myself slipping deeper into that unbearable, slow burn.

By the time we reached my home, I was drenched with arousal. I had used every ounce of control I had to not moan in front of Suman and embarrass myself.

As the palanquin came to a stop around sunset, the lifters gently lowered it to the ground.

“Aauchh…” A soft whimper escaped my lips again, and I bit hard on my lower lip to control myself. I immediately glanced at Suman to see if she’d noticed.

Thankfully, she hadn’t. She stepped out and said, “Come outside.”

I inhaled a few deep breaths and stretched my legs first before stepping out.

“Ahhh…” Another quiet moan slipped from my mouth as I tried to suppress the overwhelming sensation. I placed my feet down and straightened up, standing slowly.

The moment I did, a fresh wave of contraction hit me. My muscles tensed, and I clenched my jaw to keep another sound from escaping. I felt slick and sensitised down there.

I took a deep breath and tried to hold myself together to face my family.

But I was aching. The journey had left me desperate. I wanted his touch. The memory of him lingered in my mind, and the craving for him pulsed stronger with every passing second. My mind couldn’t stop replaying the images of him.

“Come,” Suman said again, snapping me from my thoughts. I looked at her, and she held out her hand gently. As I took it, she furrowed her eyebrows. “You look sick,” she whispered.

I blinked, flustered. Why, Rudra? Why did you do this to me now?

“I’m okay,” I managed to say quietly, barely able to speak. She slowly withdrew her hand, still watching me with suspicion.

I turned towards the main entrance and forced myself to walk. My eyes landed on my mother, grandmother, and father, all of whom were waiting to greet me with smiles. A small crowd stood behind them.

Seeing them, I instinctively quickened my steps. But the moment I did—

A sharp jolt of pleasure ripped through me. I froze in place, and my eyes widened.

It felt like I was back in our chamber, caged under him, with his hand around my neck and him deep inside me. My breathing hitched, goosebumps covered my skin, and heat surged through my body. The memory alone was torturous.

“Nandani?” My mother’s voice pulled me back, and I blinked, exhaling shakily. What’s happening to me?

“Maasa…” I tried to speak, but my voice hung in my throat. My grandmother narrowed her eyes, her voice firm.

“Ruk kyun gayi, Nandani? Gale milo apni Maasa se,” (Why did you stop? Go hug your mother.)

I nervously shook my head and sucked in a deep breath, closing my parted mouth. I stepped forward to meet my mother as the sensations slowly subsided.

Taking each step with extreme care, I spread my arms to hug my mother.

I didn't know why, but I wanted Rudra even more. I craved his touch, his smell, his hand around me, his lips everywhere on my body—him all over me.

“Are you okay?” My mother’s voice pulled me out of my daze, and I nodded immediately.

“Ji... Ji Maasa, I’m perfectly fine,” I said, with a smile plastered on my face. I had to do it. I couldn’t end up letting everyone know what kind of kinks my husband had.

“Are you sick, Nandani?” My father asked, and I turned to him. Looking at his face, I lowered my lashes, embarrassed.

“No...n...nooo...no, Baapusa. I’m okay,” I responded. Why did everyone ask me about my condition? Was it so obvious on my face?

“Aao Nandani, andar chalo,” (Come inside, Nandani), my grandmother said, holding my hand.

“Tumhara swasthya to theek hai na, Nandani? Din to nahi chad rahe?” (Are you feeling okay, Nandani... is it early pregnancy?) she asked on our way to her chamber.

I quickly shook my head, looking at her softly.

How could I possibly tell her what I was truly feeling right now? And if she somehow figured it out, what would she think of me?

“Ahh…” Just the thought sent another jolt of sensation through me, and I immediately lowered my gaze to hide it.

“You must freshen up. We’ll talk at dinner,” my father said suddenly, and I turned to him.

“Pranam, Baapusa,” I greeted. He stepped forward and gently kissed my head. I smiled. “How are you, Baapusa?” I asked, and he pulled me into an affectionate hug.

He stroked my hair softly and spoke in an emotional tone, “How does one feel when both pieces of their heart are far away, Nandani?”

I smiled faintly. Honestly, I wasn’t in a state to handle emotional talks at the time. My body was overwhelmed with a very different kind of emotion.

Still, I managed to say, “Everything will be alright soon, Baapusa.”

He smiled and gently suggested, “You must rest. You’re looking pale. I hope your half-minded husband is treating you well.” I let out a deep chuckle and instantly regretted it as another wave of sensation pulsed through me.

“Ahhh…” A soft sound escaped again, and I immediately pressed my lips shut.

He frowned, concern etched across his face as he touched my cheek. “Are you alright, bird?”

‘Bird’, that word hit me even harder, reminding me how Rudra calls me a little bird.

My cheeks flushed instantly with the rush of memory, and sensations overwhelmed me again.

“Are you okay?” he asked once more.

I nodded quickly. “Yes… umm… absolutely. He treats me well.” My voice came out shaky.

He simply smiled and said, “Go rest before dinner. We’ll talk later. You look tired from the journey.”

I nodded, grateful for the escape. Just as he turned to leave, my mother asked, “Why hasn’t Jawai sa come with you?”

Her calling him Jawai sa sent a fresh wave through me. His dangerously commanding image flashed in my mind. And I swallowed hard, the wetness between my thighs made me shift slightly.

I looked at her, “He will…” before I could stop myself, the words slipped out, and I regretted it instantly.

“When?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. I blinked, my mind scrambling.

“Actually, we’re having guests… He’s attending to them. He said… he’ll come after bidding them goodbye.” My halting words and awkward pauses made her expression tighten with concern.

“Come with me to my chamber,” my heart dropped in my stomach as she said quietly.

I was desperate for privacy, so her words sent a shiver down my spine.

Just then, my grandmother stepped in, placing her hand on my shoulder and nudging me softly. ***“Chalo Nandani, tumhe ek baar Vaid Ji ko dikhate hai... Kya pata koi sukhad samaachaar ho,”*** (Come, Nandani. Let’s have the physician take a look. Maybe there’s good news,) she said with a smile.

I felt even more embarrassed, and heat rose up my neck.

“No, Daadisa, it’s nothing like that,” I replied, laughing nervously. She lightly tapped my head.

“Why are you laughing? I’m telling you, come. Right, Abhi?” And my smile faltered. I knew I’d brought this on myself.

I was aroused when he was inserting it inside me, but not for once did I think of its consequences. Why didn’t I say no to him? Why did I let him put that in me?

“Come,” my mother repeated insistently.

“Ji…” I muttered, following her with hesitant steps into her chamber.

“Sit here,” she said. I lowered myself onto the couch, doing my best to hide the rush of sensation that came with it. She clapped her hands, calling an attendant.

“Go, bring the head physician.” My body tensed, and I quickly stood.

“Ahh,” A low moan slipped out of my mouth, and I immediately tried to cover it. “Umm, Maasa, I’m okay, truly. Just tired from the journey… and a bit hungry,”

She eyed me, her brows still drawn in concern. “It’s alright, Nandani. Let her check you once,”

I shook my head with an urge. “Nooo... I mean... Why disturb her? I’m really alright. Just food... It's enough... I'm sure,”

After a long pause, she finally nodded. “Alright. Bring her something to eat,” she told the attendant, then came to sit beside me.

I was really nervous, and my heart was racing. All I wanted was to meet him as soon as possible.

I was feeling everything at once—arousal, nervousness, desperation to be alone with him again.

She began speaking gently, asking about the wedding, about him, about how we’d been…

I tried to answer everything calmly, though inside, I was barely holding it together. After a while, some attendants returned with food, and my father joined us, settling on the opposite couch.

“Bhojan kar lo, Nandani,” (Have dinner, Nandani.) he said gently.

My problems kept increasing.

When I looked at the food, I realised I didn’t want any. My hunger, thirst, and every sense were hooked on only one thing: him. I was starving, but not for food.

It had been long, but the feeling of being so was now killing me. I was insanely turned on and needy.

“Nandani,” my mother called, and I looked at her. She held out a bite of food. I didn’t have a choice, so like a good daughter, I leaned forward, took it, chewed,

and forced it down.

Each bite was a struggle. She fed me four more before I whispered, “Uhm... I’m full.”

My grandmother narrowed her eyes. “What? You said you were hungry, but now you're full after four bites? Stop acting like a child and eat,” she said authoritatively.

I smiled weakly. “Daadisa…” and fake-yawning, I said, “I’m just tired, because I woke up early. And the journey was long,”

Everyone looked at me, and I was terrified. What if my plan of escaping didn’t work?

But then, saving me, my mother said, “It’s alright. Come, I’ll walk you to your chamber. You should rest.” I smiled gratefully and got up, trying not to show how desperate I was.

“Yes, Maasa. I’ll talk to you all tomorrow with my heart’s content,” I said as I bid goodnight to my father and grandmother.

Each step toward my chamber only intensified the ache inside me—the need for him.

When we reached, my mother opened the door with a soft smile. “Get a good sleep.”

I nodded and stepped inside. As soon as she left, I locked the door and exhaled sharply, letting out a deep moan. “Aahhhhhh…”

I rushed to the mirror and looked at myself.

My face was flushed, my lips were swollen, my skin was glowing with a heat that had nothing to do with the weather. The desire that erupted within me was unbearable.

I pulled off my dupatta and removed my heavy necklace, breathing unevenly. I was highly needy, my hand slid over to my core, through the fabric, and I gasped at how wet I was.

“Please, Rudra… come soon. I’m dying…” I whispered, breathing heavily.

I needed him. Not just him, but him taking me in all my senses, rough and fast. I wanted his hand on my neck, his fingers inside me, pushing hard.

“Ahhh…” I moaned again and looked at my reflection.

The temptation to take it out, to finger myself, to touch myself, and get over everything to have my release, was almost overwhelming—but I stopped. I had to wait. I needed to feel him, not just relief.

A long time passed as I walked around the room in circles, restlessly and desperately. My urge was not at its peak. It was hunger for him—wild and raw hunger.

I tried to calm myself. But it was impossible. It grew late.

Standing against the dressing table, I pressed my thighs together. My lashes fluttered shut, and my toes curled in anticipation. I firmly dug my nails into my

palms to control myself.

And, suddenly, I felt it—eyes on me.

Rudra.

I turned to the window and saw him leaning against it with his arms crossed over his chest. He had the same maroon kurta on, clinging to his frame. His piercing gaze locked onto me, one corner of his lips curving into a smirk, clearly at my expense.

“How are you feeling… little wife?” he asked, his voice deep yet gravelly. And his voice alone made me moan.

My body answered before my mind could, and my legs rushed towards him. Fast.

He stepped forward, too, and coiled his arms around my waist.

In moments, I was in his arms, with my hands snaked around his shoulders, on my toes.

Our lips crashed together in urgency, and he hoisted me a little, returning the kiss with the same wild, desperate hunger that had been torturing me all day.

I was burning; My whole body was on fire with the collision of our lips.

He moved us to the couch, and I shamelessly straddled him, my skirt riding up to my knees. I pushed him against the backrest of the couch and sucked on his lips with raw need. My hips moved instinctively on his lap, rubbing me against him.

He clutched my waist, pulling me even closer. Our chests clashed with each other’s, shrinking the distance between us.

I grabbed a handful of his hair and intensely moaned in his mouth when I felt him graze my core, rubbing the chain.

An irresistible vibration sparked in my body with his touch.

Suddenly, he cupped my neck tightly and made me look into his eyes. And my whole body froze as I looked into his eyes, which stared back at me with such fervour—I felt naked. The heat of his eyes melted my insides.

“Slide your finger in, please,” I pleaded, my voice hoarse with raw hunger.

Moving his finger slightly over the folds, he said, “You’re so wet, little wife,”

I closed my eyes, arching my head back. “Please, take me, I'm begging you, please. Do something, touch me, choke me, anything... please, Rudra, please,” I moaned helplessly, wanting to move my hips to feel the sensations. But his firm grip on my hips kept me in place, not even letting me breathe.

But when he pushed his finger inside me, unexpectedly, a whimper escaped my lips, making me shiver senselessly.

The ornament slipped deeper than before, and I cried out in pleasure. “Yes…”

I placed my hand on his shoulder as he slowly moved it. But I wanted more; my insides were demanding more of him.

When I drifted my hips with an urge, he pinched my waist and said, “Stay still, little sunflower.”

I stopped moving my hips as I felt him take his finger out. I blinked, thinning my eyebrows, my lips parted wide, and my cheeks flushed when he held the ring attached to the ornament and slowly pulled it out.

“Aaaahhhh….” I screamed in pure rapture, and my head fell back as I felt a warm and blissful release, the wetness trailing out.

Taking it out, he firmly commanded in a low tone, “Now, ride my fingers, like a good little wife you are, Nandani.” I nodded immediately and muttered back, “Yes, please,”

He pushed his two fingers inside, and I felt a sharp ecstasy hit me with the wetness.

My hips slowly began moving as he rubbed his thumb over my sensitive spot. But suddenly stopped, hinting to me to take the lead.

I wound my hands around his shoulder, shifting my weight over him, and moved my hips slowly through it. The noise of my bangles and anklets echoed in the chamber with my movements.

He pulled me closer by my hair, our breaths fanning over each other’s faces. My movements turned faster, and I felt an intense knot build in me.

He pressed his lips against mine, kissing me senseless, distracting me from building up sensations. I pushed him away, making him look into my eyes, and feverishly rode his fingers in need of the orgasm.

The muscles in my thighs and lower back tightened, my lower abdomen stretched uneasily, causing my head to fall back, and I moved even faster.

“Ahhhhhhhhh,” I moaned in an urge, rocking my hips quicker, grinding in sync —shamelessly, needily like a starved girl.

“Please… help me,” I cried as I felt the sensations building even stronger. “Your way, Rudra, please,” I begged, dying for a release.

Then, he gripped my neck tighter than before, choking me. My movements abruptly stopped as he took control. And he started moving his fingers, moving in and out, at a reckless pace.

My whole body trembled, and I moaned insanely.

My voice came out rough and shaky, and I bit my lower lip to resist screaming louder.

He had the pace set, moving in and out with my every inhale and exhale. And then suddenly it happened.

Wetness leaked through me, and my brain oozed immensely with the waves of pleasure hitting me.

“Ahhhhhh, Rudra,” I moaned, and he immediately eased his fingers.

“Yes, very good, little sunflower,” he grunted, caressing my core, pulling me closer.

I collapsed in his arms, panting shakily. My heart was hammering against my chest, and I pressed my head on his chest, closing my eyes.

He stroked me softly one last time before drawing his fingers out and hugging me.

Brushing my tousled hair with his fingers, he said, “My little bird missed me terribly, I must say,”

I was on the brink of passing out. Every ounce of my energy was drained. I couldn’t process anything, couldn't think of anything.

He kept caressing my head, letting me relax and feel normal.

Pressing his lips to my forehead, he kissed me with tenderness before bringing his mouth to my cheek. “I missed you so much, Nandani,” he said, his voice slow and full of love.

I closed my eyes and gently wrapped my arms around him. Kissing the side of his forehead, I threaded my fingers through his messy hair as I whispered back.

“Aapke kaaran kitni katthinaayi jheli aaj humne—na bhook lagi na pyaas. Har kshan bas aapko smaran kar rahe the. Aage se aisa na kijiyega... itne lambe samay ke liye to kabhi nahi,” (I suffered so much today because of you. Neither did I feel hungry or thirsty. I kept thinking of you every moment. Don’t do this again… not at least for such a long time,)

He chuckled and said, ***“Phal kaisa tha aapke dhairya ka?”*** (So, how was the fruit of your patience?)

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

She blushed crimson at my question, fluttering her eyes low.

“Kabhi aapke saath karenge aisa tab pata chalega aapko... kabhi to aapko bhi humaari aawashyakta hogi, tabhi chhod kar chale jaayenge hum,” (You’ll know if you’ll go through it. Just wait, when you’ll need me the most one day, I’ll leave you like that.) She playfully whined, making me laugh.

She smiled seeing me laughing, and I gently straightened up, signalling her to rise from my lap. Adjusting her clothes, she stood up and said softly, “I’ve never felt this good before.”

I smiled and stood up as well. Running a hand through my hair, I walked over to her bed and lay down, resting my head on the pillow.

“Now,” I said with a quiet grin, “I want you to return the favour.”

Shocked, she widened her eyes at my words. A flush deepened on her cheeks as she slowly walked over to me. Her fingers trembled as they brushed against her bangles, and she sat down at the edge of the bed.

I watched her blink nervously, drawing a deep breath before meeting my gaze with soft, hesitant eyes.

She shifted closer, inching forward, and brought her hand to my stomach, touching me gently but unsurely. Then, she looked up into my eyes, uncertain, as if her heart held questions her lips couldn’t speak.

I took her wrist gently and brought it to my lips. “You have such beautiful hands, little wife,” I murmured.

She grew even shyer, blinking fast.

I kissed her fingers with care and whispered in a slow, tender tone, “I’m really hungry, little bird.”

She swallowed hard, and her lips parted slightly at my words. I smiled, my voice warm and inviting as I spoke again, ***“Aaj aapke haath se bana Gatte khana hai. Hum chahte hai ki aap bhojan bana kar layein humaare liye,”*** (I wish to eat Gatta Curry made by you. I want you to cook for me.)

She frowned, taking her hands back. “What???” Her voice grew louder as she asked, and I arched my brow at her tone. “I mean... what?” she asked again, slowly. I held her gaze, meaning what I said, and she gave a shaky laugh. “Cooking? At this time?”

“Ji, I’m hungry,” I said, and she again let out an uneasy chuckle.

“Yadi humein kisi ne dekh liya to?” (What if someone sees me?) She asked anxiously.

“So, what? Are you embarrassed about cooking for me?” I asked, and she laughed a bit too dramatically.

“Hahaha, no… no, not at all, Ranaji. Why would I be?” she said, still smiling.

I smiled back. “Then off you go.”

She nodded with a grin, stepping down from the bed. Her expression briefly betrayed that she hadn’t expected something like that from me.

Picking up her dupatta, she placed it over her head and said, “I’ll be back in some time.” I nodded and looked at her as she opened the door and left.

I stood up from the bed and walked into her bathroom for a long bath.

When I closed my eyes, thoughts of whatever happened back in the kingdom rushed like a storm. My Maasimaa was firmly opposed to any peace treaty being sealed between Suryagarh and Mahableshgarh.

I had even spoken to my Guruji and my brothers.

Ranvijay and Agastya both saw the treaty from a political perspective and agreed that it was necessary for the people.

Guruji said the same, reminding me of a king’s true duty. He said that a king is a servant to his people. A king exists for the people, not the other way around. That every decision I make should be for their good, not for my interests.

That meant establishing a peace treaty, even if it meant letting go of my revenge.

But beyond all of that, my heart kept circling back to Nandani. I had given her every reason to walk away from me, yet she stayed by my side, against everything. She risked everything for me… for us.

Seeing how much she believed in our relationship, the mere thought of hurting her twisted my heart.

For her, I was willing to let go of my revenge. What use was the fruit of revenge if I couldn’t share it with her? What joy was there in victory if she wasn’t there to hold my hand?

And deep down, I knew that if she ever decided to leave, she wouldn’t look back, not even if I died. I knew her that well.

I came out of the bathroom. Her chamber was filled with her scent.

Honestly, her chamber had always felt like heaven to me. She didn’t know it, but whenever I missed her too much, I used to sneak in here just to breathe her in—on the bed, the couch, even in the bathroom.

I couldn’t explain it, but her scent was like a drug. I couldn’t go a single day without inhaling it. During those two years, I stayed away from her—just to test if I could live without her—I’d still find myself here, again and again.

Smelling her dupatta, her pillows, her towel… every corner of this room felt sacred. Every piece of her was precious to me.

After bathing, I grabbed her towel and pressed it to my face before drying myself. Wearing my lower and holding my kurta, I stepped into the bedroom.

And my eyes fell on her, standing by the window, gazing down.

“What happened?” I asked. She startled at my voice, shivering slightly before turning to face me. Her eyes closed in a brief moment of relief as she exhaled.

“I thought you left,” she said quietly, and I chuckled.

“Aise kaise. Apni patni ke haath ka swaadisht bhojan chhodkar bhala hum kyu jaayenge,” (Why would I leave without having the delicious food cooked by my wife?) I said and sat down on the couch in front of the table. “Join me.” I gestured to her.

Inhaling deeply, she walked over and sat beside me. The rich aroma of spices filled the room, making my mouth water.

“It already smells amazing,” I said, smiling.

She gave a nervous smile. “I’m really nervous. You know, my mother caught me in the kitchen.”

I raised a brow, intrigued. “Then what happened?”

She looked at me with widened eyes and voiced animatedly, “She almost caught me lying. I told her I was cooking because I wanted to eat Gatta Curry. And she immediately said, ‘But you don’t like Gatta Curry!’ I was so scared. Then I tried to cover it up and said my taste has changed. But she wasn’t buying it and star—” Before she could finish, I shut her up by feeding her a big bite.

She gasped, narrowing her brows, then reluctantly began chewing. Just as she swallowed and opened her mouth again, “Rudra, I don’t li—”

I fed her another bite, and she stared at me, half annoyed, half surprised, and chewed faster, determined to finish before I could silence her again.

I kept feeding her, bite after bite, until she gave up trying to finish the story.

“Aap bhi to khaaiye,” (You also eat,) she suggested, while eating.

I nodded and said, “Let my little wife get some energy first.” She smiled softly and rested her head on my shoulder, calm and content.

I kept feeding her and started eating, too—one bite for her, one for me. We ate in silence, and honestly, I loved every moment of it. The food was delicious, rich in flavour, and full of love.

“Should I tell you something?” I asked.

She looked at me and nodded. “Ji?”

I smiled and took the last bite, finishing everything she had cooked. “You cook just like my mother,” I said gently. “The last time I ate something like this… was when my mother made it for me,”

Her eyes widened with surprise, but she didn’t speak for a moment. She just stared at me quietly.

“Really?” she finally whispered.

I nodded slowly. “Thank you. I feel like I’ve eaten something to my heart’s content. After such a long time, I feel full—not just in my stomach,” I said, taking her hands in mine. “I don’t know how to say it, but it’s like… I’ve come home after a long journey,” my voice turned by the end, emotions welling up.

She held my hands tightly, saying nothing, and rested her head against my shoulder again.

I didn’t know why, but it felt like peace. Like the calm after a long storm—a storm that had destroyed everything in its path. But now, finally, it was time to rebuild… from scratch. And somehow, that no longer felt impossible.

Silence settled between us, but soothing. After a while, she shifted and gently pulled away. “Come to bed,” she said, holding my wrist as she stood up.

I rinsed my hands in the bowl, dried them, and followed her to bed.

She slipped under the comforter and, patting the space beside her, said. “Now you should also have a backache,” she teased.

I chuckled and lay down beside her. She wrapped her arms around me the moment I did, pulling me close. I rested my head on her midriff and pressed my cheek against her warm skin. My hands settled gently beside her waist, and I could feel her warmth soaking into me.

I closed my eyes as she gently ran her fingers through my hair, calming my restless mind with soft, slow strokes. I didn’t even realise when I drifted off to sleep.

I stirred only when I felt her lightly shaking my shoulder. “Rudra…” she whispered.

I inhaled deeply and shifted slightly over her chest. “Rudra,” she said again, shaking me more urgently. I didn’t want to wake up. It felt too good and calming, like I had finally exhaled after holding my breath for years.

“Rudraaaa…” Her voice now trembled, laced with worry. And I slowly opened my eyes, still heavy with sleep, and looked at her.

She looked pale. Her eyes were wide, her lips were trembling, and her cheeks flushed crimson.

Was my little wife feeling needy again?

I instinctively moved closer and placed my lips on hers, kissing her deeply, sucking her lower lip passionately, cupping her cheek in my hand.

But before I could even savour the moment, she shoved me with all her strength. And I stumbled off the bed, landing with a loud thud on the floor, my legs tangled in the comforters.

“Jawai saa!!!” Two voices reached my ears, and my eyes shot toward the door.

And there they were.

Her mother and grandmother, standing there frozen, wide-eyed, staring at me in absolute horror.

Noooo…

“Aap theek to hai?” (Are you okay?) Her grandmother walked close to me, and believe me when I say that I never felt so embarrassed in my whole life.

I grabbed the comforter, yanked it over my face, and mumbled in sheer panic, “I’m not here… I’m not here…”

“Maasa, chaliye yahaan se,” (Maasa, let’s get going,) I heard her mother whispering.

Her grandmother walked closer. ***“Ruko, Abhi. Humein jawai sa se mil to lene do,”*** (Wait, Abhi. Let me meet our son-in-law first.) My heart was racing like crazy.

I took a sharp breath and slowly lowered the comforter from my face. My eyes immediately found Nandani. Her cheeks were flushed deep red as she hid her face in embarrassment, looking like she wished she could vanish on the spot.

“Kuch kshan rukiye Daadisa,” (Wait for some moments, Daadisa.) I managed to speak in a slow voice. I wrapped myself in the comforter, hiding my half-naked body, and shuffled toward the couch. Picking my kurta, I pulled it on quickly and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to compose myself.

Taking a deep breath, I walked to her and reached to touch her feet, but she quickly held my shoulders to stop me.

“Aree, aree! Jawai peir nahi choote,” (No, no, Sons-in-law do not touch feet,) Yet she placed her hand on my head and said, ***“Sukhee bhava! Mahadev aapki har manokaamna poorn karein,”*** (Be happy, may god fulfil all your wishes.)

I walked towards her mother, who had her face covered with a veil and was facing the other side. “Ji, Pranaam,”

I greeted her in a serious tone.

“Kshma kijiyega, humein pata nahi tha ki aap aaye hain, anayatha hum Nandani ke kaksh mein nahi aate... kal iski aswastha kuch theek nahi lag rahi thi to bas dekhne chale aaye,” (Pardon us, We didn't know that you were here otherwise we wouldn’t have come to Nandani's chamber... She seemed unwell yesterday, so we came to ask her about her health.) she explained.

I felt highly embarrassed and instantly said, “Please, I am just leaving.”

And before I could move, her grandmother chimed in with a cheerful voice, completely ignoring the awkward tension lingering in the air.

“No, no! Why should you leave? It’s Holi today—we won’t let you go without celebrating the festival!”

I gave a weak smile, still trying to gather myself, and glanced at Nandani. She had quickly stood up from the bed and grabbed her dupatta, draping it over her head with fumbling hands.

“Daadisa, ye vyast hain. Yahaan to ye keval humaara swasthya poochne aaye the,” (Daadisa, he is busy with work back in our empire. He came here to ask about my health,) she reasoned with shaky hands and an embarrassed voice.

Her grandmother immediately scolded her. ***“Tum to chup hi raho, Nandani. Jawai sa aaye aur tumne to bataya bhi nahi,”*** (Hush you, Nandani. You didn’t even tell us that he is here,)

Her mother intervened, “Maasa, chaliye yahaan se,” (Maasa, let’s go from here), and she immediately turned to look at her.

“Tum Maa-beti ek jesi hi ho. Humein to koi kuch batata hi nahi, hum apne jawai sa se baat nahi kar sakte kya?” **(**You both are alike. You don't tell me

anything. Can I not talk to my son-in-law?) She exclaimed, and I smiled.

Alright.

"Aaiye, Daadisa hum baith kar baat karte hai," (Come, Daadisa, let's sit and talk,) I said, and her face instantly lit up.

We both sat on the couch. Although I was embarrassed to be caught like that, I had to behave well, and I looked at Nandani standing there.

"Tum bhi betho Nandani, aao" (Come, Nandani, you sit as well), Daadisa said.

Timidly, she took steps toward us and quietly sat beside her grandmother, who now sat right between us.

Then, out of nowhere, her mother spoke up.

"Aap bethkar baatein kijiye, hum bhojan ka prabandh karte hai," (You all sit and talk, I'll go see arrangements for breakfast,)

Her grandmother nodded and said, ***"Jao Jao, Abhi, aur Raj ko bhi kehna ki Rudra aaye hain,"*** (Yes. And, Abhi, let Raj know that Rudra has come.) She nodded and walked out of the chamber.

She looked at me and asked, ***"To kaisa hai sab Suryagarh mein?"*** (How is everything in Suryagarh?) I smiled at her and nodded.

"Everything is good and slowly settling," I tried to speak calmly.

"Chalo accha hai. Kal Nandani ka swasthya theek nahi tha to humein laga ki kahin koi shubh sanket to nahi…" (Very well. Yesterday, Nandani seemed sick, so I thought there might be some news…) She said with a soft smile, and my eyes widened with shock and nervousness.

I looked at Nandani's face, which got me so nervous. I gulped and chuckled deeply, shaking my head. ***"Abhi to Nandani bahut nasamajh or choti hain,"*** (Nandani is too young and silly,) she laughed.

"Vo to hai lekin humaari Nandani bahut samajhdar bhi hai... sabka bahut dhyan rakhti hai, sabse bahut prem karti hai," (That is true but our Nandani is very intelligent and thoughtful... she takes care of everyone and loves everyone,) She spoke, and I smiled.

"Ji, that I know very well,"

Suddenly, she furrowed her brows, put her hand behind her back, and took something from under her. ***"Ye kya chubb raha hai?"*** (What is this poking me?)

She held the gold ornament in her hand, inspecting it with a sharp, unreadable gaze.

A wave of panic hit me. I became incredibly timid and nervous. My eyes practically popped out of their sockets as I stared at her, holding it.

Nandani looked just as terrified—her cheeks flushed a deep, furious red as she glanced anxiously at her.

"Aree Nandani, ye kya hai. Ye kis prakaar ka Aabhooshan hai, bada sundar hai,?" (What is this, Nandani? It is very beautiful. What kind of ornament is this?)

This was it.

I wanted to run and vanish into thin air.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

My heart leapt into my throat, and my head spun in complete embarrassment.

Seeing the ornament in her hands, memories of the previous night flashed in my mind, sending a wave of shock through me.

The moans and sensations made me shiver slightly, as I could almost feel them again.

My eyes widened as I looked at Rudra. He, too, seemed nervous... maybe even embarrassed.

I quickly reached out to take the ornament from Daadi-sa's hand, but she pulled it back, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Haath me se kyun cheen rahi ho, Nandani? Hai kya ye?" (Why are you snatching it, Nandani? What is this?)

I squirmed in my place, sweat beads trailed down my back as I didn't know what to say.

"Daadisa, ye... wo...umm... ye...aaa... ye…" (Daadisa, this... that... this... this…) My wobbly lips couldn't even blabber. I wanted to come up with something sensible, something that would sound good.

"Ye... vo... kya laga rakha hai? Itna ghabra kyun rahi ho Nandani? Kahi tumhaara swasthya punah to nahi bigad raha?" (This... that... What is all this? And why are you looking so anxious, Nandani? Are you not feeling good again?) I shook my head like it would undo the moment and tried to laugh.

"Nahi, Daadisa, nahi, aisa kuch nahi hai, sach mein, humein kuch nahi hua isse," (No, Daadisa, no, it's not like that, really, I have felt anything with this.) It almost slipped off my tongue, and when I glanced at Rudra, he was already rubbing his forehead, pressing his finger into it at my words.

"To, batati kyu nahi kuch. kitna sunder hai ye, humein bhi aisa aabhushan chaahiye, kintu pata to chale isse pehente kaise hai," (Then, why don't you tell me, this is so beautiful, I too want this ornament, but where do I wear this,) She said, her gaze sharpening on the ornament—then suddenly added, ***"Chalo, abhi ke liye hum rakh lete hain. Raj ko dikhaaenge aur kahenge ki humaare liye aisi koi anghuthi banwa de, uske baad tum humse le lena,***" (I'll keep this for now and ask Raj to make something similar to this ring for me, and then I will return this to you,) she said.

"Nahi, Daadisa, nahi.. Aapko humaari saugandh. Aap aisa kuch nahi karengi, Daadisa. Aapke liye... hum banwa denge... ye humaara nahi hai," (No, Daadi-sa, no. Swear on me that you would do no such thing. I will get one for you, Daadisa. I will... this is not mine,) I babbled, waving my hands like that would help.

I immediately took it from her hand and handed it to him.

"Ye... ye to Ranaji... humaara matlab, Daadi-sa, ye to Ranaji ka hai, inka hai, ye lekar aaye the... humein nahi pata, hume kuch nahi pata... isse kuch nahi hota," (Th-this belongs to Ranaji... I mean—Daadi-sa, this is Ranaji's, it's his, he brought it... I don't know, I know nothing... it—I don't know what it does!) I blabbered, feeling myself sink deeper into the well of shame. Rudra immediately clenched it in his fist, holding it tightly in his hand.

"Ji... Ji, Daadi-sa, ... ye... ye humaara hai," (Yes,... Yes, Daadisa, this is mine.) He kept it aside and smiled, hiding the awkwardness of our situation.

"Parantu ye kis kaam aata hai? Humne to aisa kuch pehle kabhi nahi dekha," (But what is it even used for? I've never seen anything like this before.) She asked, intrigued, as if it were something truly important and as if it would impart some valuable knowledge.

He gulped nervously, looking at her, and chuckled, ***"Ye... Daadisa, ye peeda mitaata hai,"*** (This... Daadisa, this relieves pain.) He managed to say, and I looked at him, dumbfounded.

"What?" I asked, but instantly shut my mouth and plastered a smile when Daadi-sa turned to look at me.

"What? Hehe…" I laughed uneasily. "What? Wow!!!" I tried to cover up.

She turned back to him and asked, ***"Kis prakaar ki peeda?"*** (What kind of pain?)

He gulped and scratched his forehead with the nail of his finger and exclaimed, ***"Umm, Daadisa jaise nasoan ki peeda, kabhi-kabhi adhik kaarya karne ke baad humaari hatheli mein peeda hoti hai to hum isko haath mein lekar dabaate hain. Isse kam hoti hai peeda,"*** (Ummm, Daadisa, this relieves muscle pain. Sometimes after working for long, I get cramps in my palms, so when I press it in my hand, it reduces that pain.) he said, and she smiled, looking convinced. But before she could ask anything else, he quickly added, ***"Daadisa, kshama kijiye, kintu aaj holi hai or humne aapko badhaai bhi nahi di,"*** (Pardon me, Daadisa, it's Holi today and I didn't wish you yet.)

And then she suddenly laughed. "Hahahaha, yes, even I forgot!"

I stared in disbelief. How smartly he changed the topic.

I'd never been able to pull that off in front of my sharp and all-knowing Daadisa. She always caught me. Every time.

But him? He did it so effortlessly.

What the hell?

"A very happy Holi, Daadisa," he said, smiling at her. She placed her hand on his head and replied, "A very happy Holi to you, too."

"Raaj mata[44]," Suddenly, an attendant interrupted us, and we all turned to see her standing at the door. "Ranisa is asking for you," she politely informed.

Daadisa clicked her tongue in mild irritation.

“Ye Abhi bhi na, humaare bina kuch nahi kar paati. Hum aate hain, unke kaan kheech kar,” (God, this Abhi, she can’t do anything without my help... I’ll come back after scolding her.) She spoke, and we both stood as she began to rise. I stepped forward to help her stand and walked her to the door.

“You stay here. I’ll manage,” she said and stepped out of the chamber.

As soon as she left, I closed the door behind her and leaned against it, trying to calm my horse-riding heartbeats.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, exhaling shakily. When I looked up, he was already looking at me.

Silence fell for a few long moments.

I could hear nothing but my wild heart, my uneven breaths, and I felt my knees trembling.

And when our eyes met, we burst into laughter.

I nearly rolled onto the floor, clutching my stomach, while he collapsed onto the couch, laughing uncontrollably.

My insides ached, my cheeks hurt, and tears streamed down my face from laughing so insanely.

“Oh, Nandani, I love her,” he said between laughs. And mine disappeared. Because at that moment, I realised... This was the first time I’d ever seen him laugh like that. So freely. So genuinely.

I walked over to him as he wiped away his tears, still smiling.

He looked so happy. So incredibly cute.

And I… I couldn’t stop myself from saying it. ***“Aap haste hue bahut pyaare lagte hain, Rudra,”*** (You look really good when laughing, Rudra.) He looked at me, and slowly, his laughter faded.

Straightening himself, he gazed at me as I stepped closer—our eyes locked in silence.

Then, in one swift move, he pulled me and shifted me beneath him.

I gasped, caught off guard, and stared up at him, stunned by the sudden movement.

“Humaari Ranisa ko pehli Holi ki bahut-bahut shubkaamnayein,” (Many heartfelt wishes to my Ranisa on her first Holi.) He said and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek.

A small smile tugged at my lips as I looked into his eyes. I could feel his feet brushing against mine, our chests gently pressed together, and his body perfectly caging me under him.

“Aapko bhi Ranaji,” (You too, Ranaji.)

Suddenly, I shivered when a loud knock echoed against the door. He frowned, his eyebrows narrowing at the sudden interruption.

The knocking grew louder, more urgent. He quickly moved off me, and I slipped out from under him, standing up and straightening my clothes in a hurry.

As I walked toward the door, I could feel his eyes watching me silently from the couch. A soft smile lingered on my lips, as this was my first Holi with him.

I gently touched the lock, twisting it open, then reached for the handles.

And just as I began to pull the door open—before I could even register what was happening—a plateful of powdered colours came flying at me.

In an instant, I was covered from head to toe in a cloud of dry pink.

"HAPPY HOLI, BHABHI SA…"

Agastya's voice, bubbling with excitement and mischief, reached my ears, and I started coughing like crazy.

I waved my hands frantically to clear the cloud of colour, dusting off my clothes as best as I could, and glared at him. "Agastya!" I shouted.

He burst into laughter, so loud and lively.

Anger shot through me. I hadn't expected it at all. "I'm not sparing you now!" I warned, taking a step forward to grab him.

But he turned on his heel and bolted, and I ran after him.

"Just wait and watch! I'll teach you a lesson!" I yelled, chasing him through the corridors.

Holding up my skirt, barefoot, I ran, determined and furious, yet laughing somewhere deep inside.

"Hum aapke haath aane se rahe, Bhabhisa," (You won't catch me so easily, Bhabhisa!) He laughed loudly, his voice echoing through the garden.

My eyes briefly caught sight of the table set with plates piled high with Holi colours nearby, surrounded by vibrant decorations in the palace.

I grabbed a plate of colour and kept running after him.

I spotted Suman standing right in my path, and he looked back at me once, still laughing, when he crashed straight into her.

I burst into laughter, raising the plate high, ready to throw the colour at him. But he was too quick to turn Suman towards me and duck behind her.

I looked at her, frozen, completely coated in pink, coughing and blinking through the dust.

"Nandani!" she yelled, and I winced, gritting my teeth. While behind her, he laughed even louder, enjoying the chaos.

"Hahaha… Bhabhisa yadi aapne humein pakad liya to agle ek varsh tak hum aapki har baat maanenge," (Hahaha, Bhabhisa, if you catch me today, I will obey all your orders for the next one year.) he said. Still, I was too focused on Suman, who was coughing even more intensely.

"Nandani! What did you do?" she complained, and I shot him a furious glare.

"Suman, catch him!" Before she could even react to what I said, he ran away from there.

I ran after him. "Agastya!" I called out as I saw him slipping through another corridor. But he abruptly paused, and my eyes caught him grabbing a pot filled

with water. And before I could even raise a hand or shout—

A wave of water hit me in the face, splashing down my body, turning me into a dripping mess.

“Agastya!!” I yelled, absolutely stunned. ***“Chhodenge nahi hum aapko,”*** (I will not leave you.) I screamed in utter frustration and ran after him again.

“Pehle pakadiye to sahi,” (First catch me.) He said with a grin, then took off again, sprinting straight into the open garden where the grand Holi celebrations were happening.

Tables were lined with plates of vibrant colours, trays of sweets and festive drinks. Drums echoed through the air as musicians played and people danced joyfully.

Hundreds of people were celebrating—laughing, chasing, and smearing colour over one another. The sky was drenched in hues of pink, yellow, green, and blue, filled with joy and laughter.

I saw him slow down for just a moment, and taking the chance, I hurled the colour at him.

But he managed to shield his face, but the rest of his white kurta was utterly ruined. He burst into laughter. And before I could even blink, he tossed an entire plate of yellow right at me, covering me from head to toe.

“Again?!” I gritted, wiping my face, and charged after him once more. Suddenly, my sight fell on my father, behind whom Agastya hid smugly.

“Humein bachaaiye Raja ji,” (Please save me, Raja ji). He said, grinning behind my father, and I narrowed my eyes.

Holding a pot of water in my hands, I stepped forward. “Baapusa, please move aside. I swear, I’m not sparing him today.”

My father raised his brows and tried to speak, “Nandani, this is our gu—”

But before he could finish, I raised the pot, but—Agastya shifted at the ending moment, and my father stepped to the side, causing the water to splash straight onto my father.

“Agastya!” I screamed, and he laughed uncontrollably.

I looked at Baapusa, wiping the water off his face, a small smile tugged at his lips. “Nandani, playing like this early in the morning... at least have breakfast first,” he said, and Agastya laughed even louder.

“Bhabhi-sa, you’ll never catch me!” he taunted. I narrowed my eyes, ready to launch at him again, before my eyes landed on Ranaji and Ranvijay, standing beside my father.

Rudra gave me a blank look, while Ranvijay looked utterly shocked, his mouth slightly open.

Oh no! I wasn’t a child anymore. I was the queen.

I quickly pulled my dupatta over my head, which had slipped off during my chaotic chase, and stood there, shy, shrinking into the moment.

But suddenly. ***“Bhabhisa, pakad liye humne, aap lagaiye inhe rang,”*** (Bhabhisa, I have caught him, now colour him.)

I looked at Ranvijay, who had caught Agastya by the hand from behind, and Agastya yelled, “Bhaisa, this is all cheating!”

A wide smile spread across my face instantly, and I ran to the table and grabbed two plates of different colors. Without wasting a second, I hurled the yellow colour at him, covering him from head to toe.

Trying to escape, he almost crouched to the floor, but I was faster. I emptied another plate of green colour right onto his head, turning all his hair bright green, and laughed loudly.

“Ek varsh tak saari baatein maanenge ab aap humaari,” (Now, you will obey everything I will say for one year.) I said, and he looked at Ranvijay.

“Bhaisa, Aap bhi na,” (Bhaisa, you.) he whined and stood up to dust the colour off his white kurta.

I smiled, but suddenly the voice of my grandmother caught my attention.

“Ye kya Nandani, sawere-sawere shuru ho gayi…” (Nandani, what is this? You started early in the morning…) She scolded, making a face at me.

I looked at her and my mother, standing beside him and said, ***“Daadi-sa, hum nahi ye Abhinan…”*** (Daadi-sa, it’s not me, it’s Abhinan…) I stopped midway, realising what I had said.

My heart instantly sank the moment I realized it wasn’t Abhinandan. He wasn’t here, and my smile vanished at once.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I tried not to let them fall.

Baapusa stepped closer and immediately pulled me into a tight hug. “Prince Agastya is also like our Abhinandan, Nandani,” he said, trying to comfort me, and I closed my eyes, hiding my face in his chest.

“He’s okay. He’s doing well. I’m keeping an eye on him through our secret agents,” he assured me gently. I nodded faintly. “Don’t worry. He’ll soon understand everything,” he said, patting my head softly.

“Abhinandan ki chinta mat karo Nandani, wo theek hai. Humein patra likhta rehta hai, (Don’t worry about Abhinandan, Nandani, he is doing well. He keeps writing me letters.) Daadisa said, walking closer, and I released the hug.

“Lekin humaari chinta to karni padegi,” (But you have to worry about me.) She said dramatically and brought her colour-filled hands to me, rubbing them against my cheeks gently.

I chuckled weakly and exclaimed, “Daadisa! You too!” She laughed, and suddenly, my father threw colour at me.

“And me as well!” he said, laughing with joy, and I burst into laughter.

“A very happy Holi, Nandani,” he said warmly, his eyes twinkling. I looked at myself, all covered in colours, and he smiled at me, then added gently, “You all must enjoy. Rudra and I have something to talk about.”

I looked at Rudra, who was looking at me. A small smile played on his lips, and I instinctively lowered my gaze, suddenly shy.

I gave a slight nod and watched them both walk away.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

She ran after Agastya, and I just smiled, feeling ecstatic to see her like that again.

Once she left, I stepped into the bathroom and quickly refreshed myself. I took a quick bath and finished my morning routine.

Just as I came out, I saw Ranvijay waiting for me. “Here it is,” he said, handing over the extra pairs of clothes I had asked him to bring yesterday.

I changed into a fresh white kurta and ran my fingers through my damp hair. And just as I was ready, my eyes caught her father entering the chamber with a few officials.

I didn’t know why, but a strange uneasiness settled in me. Still, I couldn’t avoid him—this was his kingdom.

“Rana Rudra Dev Singh,” he said with a wide smile, opening his arms for a hug. I walked up to him with a heavy heart and gave him a loose hug. He patted my back in affirmation, and I managed a weak smile.

“Happy Holi, Rudra,” he wished me.

“Happy Holi to you too, Rajaji.” Releasing the hug, I wished him back with a flat voice as he patted my shoulder.

We looked at each other, and honestly, I had no idea what to say or how to begin. And then, suddenly, he started speaking.

“Rudra, pehle to humaare madhya jo bhi hua un sabke vishay mein baat karne ka humein avasar hi nahi mila. Kintu ab hum chaahte hain ki hum dono kuch samay ke liye saath bethe, ek sasur or jawai ke bhaanti nahi apitu do Rajao ki tarah baat karein,” (Rudra, first of all, because of everything that happened in the last few months, we didn’t get enough time to talk. But now, I want us to spend some time together and talk about things, not as a son-in-law and father-in-law, but as two kings.) He said, and I nodded.

I didn’t exactly know what had changed between us, but something had. I stayed with these people for three months when I first came disguised as Abhinandan's friend. Despite knowing I was the son of Suryadev Singh, they welcomed me with open hearts, and for that, I have always been grateful to them.

“Ji, humein bhi aapse kuch baat karni hai,” (Sure, I too want to talk to you.) I spoke, and he gestured toward the outside of the chamber.

The three of us—Ranvijay, her father, and I—walked through the corridors, possibly towards a hall. That’s when my eyes caught Nandani yelling at Agastya, running behind him.

She was soaked, completely drenched in colour from head to toe, and charged toward us.

When Agastya hid behind her father for cover, she warned him to move aside. And before he could react, she flung a pot full of water straight at him, leaving her

father dripping in colored water.

He scolded her lightly, but she tried to justify herself. And I just stood there watching them, sharing small laughs and chatter. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy at the warmth this family shared. I felt unlucky.

But even with that feeling, I was happy for her. She never said it, but I knew how much she missed them. I had seen it on her face countless times. And now, she looked more than happy, alive in a way I hadn't seen before.

But seeing her shed tears for her brother twisted something inside me. I knew I had wronged both Abhinandan and Nandani by punishing them for their parents' actions.

I was pulled from my thoughts when her father said, “You all must enjoy. Rudra and I have something to talk about.”

She gave a nod before I followed her father to the meeting hall.

Once we arrived, Rajaji said, “Please, have a seat.”

I sat beside Ranvijay and watched attendants come in carrying large platters of food, fruits, and juices.

“Have something, Rudra,” he said kindly.

I picked up a glass of juice and looked at him. “I want to apologise… for everything that happened at the wedding,” I said. He shook his head and smiled.

“Do not worry about that. What ends well is all well.” I returned a faint smile and took a sip of the juice. I wasn’t sure where to begin.

But then, I noticed him standing, and I rose with him.

Walking closer, he stood before me, and I looked at his expression, which was turning a little emotional, as if something unspoken lingered between us.

Suddenly, the sound of anklet bells reached my ears, and I turned to see her mother entering the hall, a delicate veil drawn down to her nose.

She walked with quiet grace and came to stand beside him.

“Rudra, Maharani Abhishree aapse kuch baat karna chahti hai,” (Rudra, Queen Abhishree wishes to talk to you.) He said, and I nodded lightly.

“Ji,”

“Ranaji, isse poorv humein kabhi ye baat kehna aawashyak nahi laga, kintu ab aap keval Abhinandan ke mitra nahin hain humaare jawai bhi hai,” (Ranaji, until now, we never felt the need to say this, but you are no longer just Abhinandan's friend, you are our son-in-law now.) Her mother said, and my palms tightened around the glass.

“Please, I don’t want to talk about any of this. I love Nandani and that's the only thing that matters to me now,” I tried to say. But her parents joined their hands in front of me.

“Ranaji, aaj se bees varsh poorv jo bhi hua, hum nahi kahenge ki tab hum sahi the. Kintu kam se kam humaare mann ki shaanti ke liye hum batana chaahte hain ki kya hua tha. Kyunki hum nahi chahte ki humaare madhya kisi

bhi anuchit dhaarna ke kaaran Nandani ko dukh pahuche,” (Rudra, we won’t say that we were right about what happened twenty years ago. But at least for our peace of mind, we want to tell you what really happened. Because we don’t want Nandani to be hurt because of any misunderstanding between us.) Her father spoke, and I drew a deep breath, blinking nervously. My heart sank deeper, and I didn’t know what to say or do.

Did any of it even matter when I had already chosen to let go of my revenge?

“Rajaji, please, I don—”

“Please, Jawai-sa,” her mother gently cut me off.

I paused, inhaling deeply. I could feel the emotion in her voice, the weight of her words pressing into the silence.

“I was around nineteen or twenty when Rajaji's army attacked Pratapgarh… and killed my brother,” she began. “He had me captured, and the only hope I was left with was the Prince of Suryagarh—your father. Because my brother, Abhidev Pratap Singh, had promised me to him. Without asking me. Without even telling me. And yet… I accepted it wholeheartedly. Because I trusted my brother blindly,” her voice was steady but heavy with memories. The mention of my father refreshed a few memories of my father and mother altogether.

“He came to Mahabaleshgarh to help me escape Rajvardhan and his torture. But I had no idea he was already married… not just once, but to nearly fifteen women. He was in his forties, and the kind of intentions he had towards me were sickening. I didn’t know any of this. Neither did Raj tell me. Instead, he forcibly married me. But the very next day, when I saw him for the first time and spoke to him, you know what he said?” She paused, her eyes fixed on me, with a sad and quiet disappointment.

“He called me a 'whore.' And then he said he would come back and make me roam naked through the streets of Mahabaleshgarh. Being a girl, I was thankful to the man who had forcibly married me to protect me from another man. And even though that man was once my fiancé, he humiliated me, called me filthy names,” she spoke, and I lowered my gaze, unable to meet her eyes.

“We let him go only because he was a guest in Mahabaleshgarh then. But he didn’t stop there. One day, when I was on my way to Devi Maa’s temple, he attacked me. He abducted me and tried to force himself on me. That day, he confessed—he had had his eyes on me since the first time he saw me. He had befriended my brother only to drag him into the pit of alcohol, drugs, and gambling. Slowly, he drained Pratapgarh’s wealth. And when my brother had nothing left, he asked for my hand in exchange for a hundred thousand gold coins. They traded me, Rudra. It was worse than a political alliance. And if you don’t believe me, see this.”

She handed me a scroll.

Honestly, my hands were trembling. All my life, I believed she had been promised to my father as part of a political arrangement. If what she was saying was true… then everything I had known was a lie.

If it were true, I didn't deserve to be alive. If it were true… I didn't want to live anymore.

With shaking fingers, I unrolled the letter. The first thing I saw was the seal of Suryagarh… and Pratapgarh.

My eyes instantly welled up as I recognised my father's handwriting without a second thought.

I silently begged the gods inside—let it be false. Let everything she said be a mistake, I wished.

But as I began to read, my breath slowed, and my heart started to race. In the back of my mind, every sweet memory I had of my father flickered, only to fade and twist into doubt.

The scroll slipped from my hands, and I stumbled back onto the couch.

That meant… my father never loved my mother. All those marriages weren't just political; they were to feed his physical hunger.

And even with so many wives and children, he had set his eyes on her, just to satisfy himself. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe he had fallen that low.

How could he?

Tears began to stream down my face as Ranvijay held my shoulders.

"Bhaisa…" "Rudra…"

Their voices grew distant, fading into the surrounding blur. I stood up and walked away, unable to speak or stay.

My body trembled. Every step felt heavier than the last. My mind spiralled with questions—what part of my life had ever been true? What part of my struggle, my sacrifices… had ever meant anything?

"Bhaisa!" "Rudra, wait!"

Their voices called out, but I couldn't stop. I needed to escape. Everything felt too tight, too suffocating, like something heavy was crushing my chest, not letting me breathe.

I cupped my mouth with a shaking hand as I walked through the corridor, lost in a sea of people, searching for some corner to be alone.

Suddenly, in the snap of a finger, everything had changed. My mind felt shattered, scattered into pieces I couldn't gather.

I held back my tears until I reached her chamber. Closing the door behind me, I slid against it as the dam inside me broke.

I cried—loud, broken sobs tearing through my chest.

My mother loved him. She sacrificed everything for that man. And what did he do? He ran after another woman, throwing it away just to claim her. How could he try to force himself on her? How could he fall so low? Why?

Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?

Who had I been fighting for all these years? Who had I been sacrificing myself for? A man who didn’t deserve it. A man who deserved to die.

And if he were alive—if he had done that in front of me—I swear, I would have killed him myself.

Was it all a lie? Was my entire life built on a lie?

I had lived with one goal—to avenge his death. Because I believed he died fighting for something just, something noble. But all along… It was just lust—just his filthy hunger.

“Bhaisa, open the door… Bhai-sa,”

Ranvijay’s voice pulled me back. I wiped my tears and tried to steady my breath. “I’m okay, Ranvijay… I just need a little time alone.”

I heard him sigh before replying, “Alright. But please, take care of yourself. Remember, you’re like a father to Agastya and me, a big brother, Bhabhisa’s husband, and now a king. Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

His words broke me all over again.

“I know,” I whispered, my voice shaky. And I cried helplessly.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

It had been a long and tiring day. I met everyone—everyone I'd known since childhood until now. They all said they missed me. And I missed them too.

Everyone I knew coloured me from head to toe: my family, my friends, the young girls, and the old women I used to talk to before I got married.

I was truly happy.

Looking at myself in the mirror, completely covered in colours, I felt loved. Yet, there was one person, actually two, who hadn't coloured me: my brother and my husband.

Well, I knew why my brother hadn't. But it surprised me that I hadn't seen my husband since I last saw him with my father.

Was everything alright? I hoped he wasn't upset with me, maybe for being playful, or because Agastya had coloured me first, not him.

I wasn't sure why, but my heart felt heavy. There was a restlessness, a dull ache in me perhaps, because I hadn't eaten anything since morning.

He was probably out at work, perhaps to meet his Guruji, or maybe he was forbidden from playing Holi, as it was considered a joyous occasion.

I walked weakly towards the bathing room, a cloud of thoughts swirling in my mind. Stripping off my coloured clothes, I let my long hair loose as I entered the swimming pool.

A few attendants joined me to help scrub the colours from my skin, applying herbal pastes and aromatic oils all over my body. They washed my hair thoroughly, using several masks, ending with a lavender one to leave its gentle fragrance behind.

After the long, relaxing, yet thoughtful bath, I stepped out and changed into a cotton peach lehenga to be comfortable at night, yet decent enough for dinner in the dining hall.

I removed the extra jewellery, leaving my nose ring, bangles, waist chain, anklets, and headpiece in place.

"You all may leave. And if anyone asks about me, please tell them I'm having dinner in the chamber," I told the attendants who were helping me dry my hair.

"Okay, Princess," they nodded. I gave them a faint smile and watched as they left.

Night had already fallen, and I still had no idea where my husband was. He couldn't be with my parents or his brothers because I had been with them until the evening.

I didn't want to overthink it, but something inside me… didn't feel right. My heart was unsettled, and a deep dread began taking hold.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

I could feel it in my bones. A tight, chilling unease crept through me, and my body shivered as the winds shifted outside. My eyes welled up with tears, uninvited.

As I stepped back, my toe ring caught on my flared skirt and pierced my skin. A sharp sting shot through me.

“Ahh…” My eyebrows pulled tight, and when I saw a drop of blood oozing from my toe, my heart sank even further.

I crouched down quickly, adjusting the ring back in place, and stared at the small wound, tears falling freely now.

A strange fear clutched my chest. My instincts screamed, and not wasting a moment, I stood and ran to the door. Swinging it open, I saw the soldiers stationed outside.

“Can you please search for Ranaji?” I asked quickly.

They bowed. “Yes, Princess.” Two of them set off immediately.

I bit my lower lip and began pacing the chamber, waiting for the soldiers to return. I even refused dinner and instructed the attendants not to inform anyone. I didn’t want to cause a panic or worry anyone.

After what felt like ages, the soldiers finally returned.

I rushed toward them with hope and fear warring inside me. “Did you find him?”

They shook their heads. “Apologies, Princess… but we couldn’t find him anywhere.”

I froze. Something inside me cracked.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I whispered a silent prayer for his safety.

Time suddenly slowed as I kept waiting for him. My eyes drifted up to the stars and the full moon, watching them shift ever so slightly, their movement almost invisible, quietly marking the passage of time. It was past midnight.

The palace was slowly falling into silence. Attendants and people had begun returning to their rooms and chambers.

I closed my eyes, my lips trembling as I whispered a prayer from my aching heart.

“Please, Mahadev… please… I’m begging you… keep him safe… please…” And then a thought struck me.

Had he left a letter for me?

I immediately rushed towards the table, then to the dressing table, the couch, every corner, and finally the bed. I tore through everything in search of any note, any scroll.

And there, nestled between the pillows, my eyes landed on a golden scroll. I snatched it up, my hands trembling as I unrolled it.

My heart skipped as I instantly recognised his handwriting. My voice shook, my knees felt weak as I began to read:

"Yadi jeevan mein humne sabse adhik kisi se prem kiya hai, to woh aap hain, Nandani. Keval aap." (If I have loved anyone the most in my life, it's you, Nandani. Only you.)

My brows furrowed. That was it? Was this all he left behind?

What did it mean, Rudra? Why just this?

And then… the terrifying thought hit me. What if something had happened to him?

A wave of fear crashed through me, and I broke into silent sobs, my body trembling, shivers running through me.

"Please… I beg you… please, come back… just once… please…" I whispered through my tears.

Suddenly, the door flew open, and my head snapped up.

Through my blurred vision, I saw him, standing there, soaked. His clothes dripped with water, his hair wet. His face was red, his eyes, nose, and lips were swollen.

I couldn't hold myself back. I ran to him.

But I stopped just a few feet away, my whole body trembling.

In a broken voice, I asked, "Wh… what d-did… it… what did it mean?"

I threw the letter at his chest and broke down completely.

He began to cry, too. And through my sobs, I stepped closer to him.

"Aisa...aisa ky...kya ho gaya... Achanak... Rudra... aisa kya ho gaya... Jo aapne itna bada nirnay...le liya... Kya ho gaya aisa?" (Wha... What the he... What... Happened, that you... You went to... Went to take such... drastic step, Rudra? What the hell happened?) I asked in a shaky voice, in between hiccupped sobs, as I gripped the collar of his kurta, trying to make him look at me.

He burst into tears, keeping his head down, refusing to meet my eyes.

I wound my arms tightly around his shoulders, clinging to him as I wept. ***"Aapko kuch ho jaata... to hum jee nahi paate... nahi jee paate hum…"*** (If anything had happened to you... I couldn't have survived... I couldn't have lived...) My knees gave way, and I crumpled to the floor, tears pouring down my face.

"Aap kyun nahi samajhte... mar jaayenge hum… nahi hai hum saksham swayam ko sambhaalne mein... humne apna bhavishya aapke bina dekha hi nahi, Rudra... aap kyun... nahi... samajhte..." (Why don't you understand? I will die without you. I'm not capable of holding myself together. I have never seen a future without you, Rudra. Why… don't… you… understand?) My voice faded into near silence as I sobbed uncontrollably.

He dropped to his knees before me and pulled me into a tight, trembling embrace.

“I’m sorry… I’m so, so sorry. I really am… I’m sorry,” he cried, pressing his hand gently to the back of my head. I clung to his shoulder, shut my eyes, and held him like he might disappear again.

“Why did you leave?” I whispered through my cries. “Why?”

He hugged me tighter. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry… please…”

I lifted my head, cupping his neck and face with both hands, gently turning his face towards mine. His eyes remained closed, brows furrowed, face wet with tears.

“What happened?” I asked, wiping his tears slowly. “Tell me… what happened, Rudra?”

His voice cracked as he finally spoke incoherently. “I was wrong… I am wrong. My whole life… everything… has been wrong. I don’t know who I am anymore, Nandani. I don’t know myself… I don’t know what I’ve become… Please… help me,” he choked out.

“I don’t know who I am anymore. It feels like… like something inside me has died. I don’t want to live… I don’t know my purpose. I can’t forgive myself. I hate who I’ve become. I didn’t want to be this… Nandani, please… I only came back for you,” he broke into sobs again, his voice fading into gasps.

“I love you so much… I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for every time I hurt you. I’m sorry for every tear you shed because of me. I’m begging you… This isn’t me. I don’t know who I am. I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve any of this…” His words broke apart.

I couldn’t hold back and pulled him into a tight embrace, my tears flowing freely now.

He clung to me, burying his face in the curve of my neck, his body trembling violently with the force of his cries.

“You are Rudra Dev Singh,” I whispered, holding him close. “A man I love, insanely, completely. I don’t just love you because I have feelings for you… I respect you. I honour you. You are a self-made man. A true warrior. A king not by birth but by will. You've earned everything you've achieved through your blood and fire. You're honest, you're raw, you're real. What you feel in your heart, you speak without fear. That’s rare, Rudra,” My voice trembled, but I held his face in my hands, making him look at me.

“You love me. You respect me. You chose me. You didn't turn away even knowing I spent a night with the king. No man is greater than you. No one and I would shout that to the world with pride. You are Rana Rudra Dev Singh—the King. A man your people want to see on the throne. A man they’re waiting for.” He looked like he was about to break all over again.

“Just because a few people kept the truth from you… Why are you punishing yourself for that?” I asked gently. “You were just a child. Homeless, parentless. You believed what they told you because your heart is pure. Because you saw the good in everyone. That isn’t something to be ashamed of, Rudra. That’s something

to be proud of.” He began to cry again, harder than before. “I love you so much,” I whispered.

He sank lower, folding into me as I remained kneeling. He pressed his head to my chest and knelt on the floor. “I’m… so… sorry, Nandani… for hurting you… please…”

Fresh tears slipped from my eyes as I held him, brushing my fingers through his hair.

“Shhh… shhh… It’s alright, Rudra,” I whispered. He held me tighter, his wide palms trembling as they gripped me, desperate.

“I am sorry… I hurt you. I hurt everyone…” His voice trembled, almost cracking at the weight of what he was about to say. “I thou... I thought he was my father. I thought he loved my mother... I thought he accepted a slave woman for his wife…” He paused, a sob catching in his throat, and the heartbreak in his eyes made my chest tighten.

“But I never thought he just used her, that he wanted your mother… just for fun,” he whispered bitterly. “I never knew his true intentions. How could he? I believed he died fighting for the right. I thought… he was honourable. That he didn’t deserve to be killed because he was trying to do the right thing.” His fists clenched at his sides. “But no... no. That man was selfish. A bastard. Hungry for women—as if they were just furniture to him.”

I felt his disgust and betrayal radiating. It wasn’t just grief anymore; it was rage, sorrow, and shame all tangled together.

“I’m sorry, Nandani. I’m so sorry. For hurting you, for playing with your emotions, for leaving you behind… for forcing you to take such painful steps. I’m sorry for hurting your family. I don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know anything. How will I face everyone?” He broke down again, and my heart ached watching him unravel.

The rawness in his deep, bloodshot eyes was unbearable. The pain was so real and sincere that my tears welled up again.

I had feared this moment. I knew that once the truth surfaced, it would crush him. And it had. But still, he had to carry it. That’s life. That’s the rule. No matter how brutal the truth is, we live with it.

“Hey,” I said softly, trying to steady my voice, “Look at me, Rudra… Come here.”

He kept his head low, sobbing. I gently cupped his cheek, guiding his gaze up.

“You’re all wet,” I murmured, and, rising to my feet, I held out my hand. “Come here,” I said again, firmer this time. I wrapped my fingers around his and pulled gently, helping him up.

He followed without resistance. I led him to the couch, made him sit, and turned to grab a towel. But before I could, I felt his hands around my waist, warm despite being soaked, trembling slightly.

He rested his forehead against my chest.

Even in this emotional wreckage, his presence did something to me, stirring something quiet and tender within. My stomach fluttered, an involuntary reaction to the way his big hands completely enveloped my waist, grounding himself in me.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered again, his breath brushing against my midriff, making goosebumps on my skin.

I placed the towel on his head and gently began drying his soaked hair. “Calm down,” I whispered.

And he sobbed again, deeper this time, his body still leaning into mine. “I’m so sorry. I’m not like that. I didn’t know. I’m sorry, Nandani,” he muttered again, his voice barely holding itself together.

“Shhh... shhhh…” I gently hushed him, my fingers threaded softly through his long locks, combing them gently. “You should change, Rudra. You’re all wet,” I whispered, my voice low and careful.

I stepped back, taking a breath to steady my own heart. “Let me get you another pair,” I added, already moving towards the dressing room.

He nodded slowly, lowering his gaze.

I returned with the same maroon pair he had worn earlier that morning, the one the attendees had neatly folded after washing. I held it out to him.

“Go, change,” I said softly, trying to hide the heaviness I felt in my chest. Seeing him like this—so broken, unravelled me.

He stood up from the couch, and without thinking much, I stepped closer and gently took his hand in mine. “Do you need help?” I asked.

He shook his head, wiping fresh tears off his cheeks. Even though he denied it, I couldn’t stop myself and held his hand a little tighter.

“Come,” I said, and led him into the bathroom.

Inside, I helped him sit on the stool and lifted his kurta over his head. His eyes met mine, and I leaned to place a soft kiss on his forehead. He closed his eyes at my touch.

I turned to fill a jug with water. The silence between us was heavy, thick with everything he couldn’t say.

“Was it a pond... or a river?” I asked gently, pouring the water down his back.

He bowed his head slightly and whispered, “River,”

I filled another jug and slowly poured it over him again. “And... what made you do that?” I asked, carefully watching him.

He inhaled deeply and lifted his eyes to mine. Quietly, he said, “That I’m not good for you... for anyone,” He said, and I inhaled deeply, taking a step toward his back.

I poured another jug of water over his bare skin, and my fingers moved gently, rubbing his muscles softly.

“And... what changed your mind at the last moment?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He replied just as quietly. “That you knew me from the beginning and still loved me. Not for anyone... but for you... I have to live,”

His words sent shivers coursing through my spine, and without warning, tears began to escape my eyes again.

I turned away, stepping further from him, not wanting him to see me break. I bit my lower lip and hugged myself as silent sobs left my chest. I didn’t want him to hear them.

I heard the subtle sound of the stool shifting behind me, followed by the pad of his feet. He stood up. I quickly wiped my tears, trying to collect myself.

The silence between us stretched for a few moments. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't even guess how he must be feeling. But I knew he was in profound pain. What words could comfort a man who’d just discovered that the very foundation of his life was based on lies? His trust was shattered, his beliefs were distorted, his entire life was upended, and essentially, the pillars on which a person builds his life—the past, the beliefs, the facts, the circumstances—everything was a lie.

And, realising what he tried to do to himself, shook me to the core.

I expected anything but this.

But somewhere, I could understand. He had no one—literally no one—by his side to live for. The only thing he struggled for, worked hard for, and continued to survive for was avenging his father’s death. And after twenty years, suddenly realizing that his father was the true culprit and had heinous intentions toward his mother and other women might have shaken him beyond repair; it might have pierced his heart in two.

Just then, without warning, he scooped me into his arms with a swift motion. One arm curled beneath my knees while the other wrapped around my waist. My hands instinctively coiled around his shoulders as I gazed at his face.

His chest was bare, still damp, and his fresh lower garment clung lightly to his skin.

“Rudra…” I murmured, and before I could say anything more, he leaned in and placed a long, lingering kiss on my forehead. His lips were cold from the water, yet his touch was soft.

I blinked slowly, overwhelmed, as he began walking. I didn’t stop him and closed my eyes instead, letting myself feel his warmth.

He carried me back into the bedroom and gently laid me on the bed. I immediately held his hand and shifted slightly to pull him closer.

“Rudra,” I called. He sat close to me, and I cupped his cheeks to look into his eyes.

He held my wrist and gently kissed my palm, and I blinked nervously. I began speaking of what was necessary.

“Jo kuch bhi hua, use hum parivartit nahi sakte. Beete hue kal ki yahi to visheshta hai, ki wo kitna bhi bura ho, kabhi lautkar nahi aata. Jo hua, hum nahi kahenge ki use bhool jaaiye, aage badhiye kyuki wo sab to kehne ki baatein hain. Jaise hum kuch smrutiyaan bhula nahi sakte, waise hi aap bhi kadacchit jeevan bhar in anubhavoan se ubhar na paayein.

Kintu ek samajhdar vyakti humaare liye wahi hoga jo apne aanewale kal par apne ateet ke aansuoan ki cheetein bhi na padne de.

Aap bahut samajhdar hain, humse bade hain, bhinna-bhinna logo se mile hain, aap humse adhik samajhte hai ki aapke kal ke liye, hum dono ke kal ke liye kya uchit hai aur kya anuchit.

Jis prakaar se aapne jeevan jiya hai, aur aap yahaan tak pahunche hai, wo maatra aapki yogyata va parishram ka parinaam hai. Usme anya kisi ka koi yogdaan nahi.

To aap kyun apne jeevan ko kisi aur ke liye dhwast kar rahein hain? Tanik drushti ghumaakar, apne aas-paas dekhein, log bhukmari se jujh rahein hain, anekoan rogoan se grast hai, apnoan ko gawakar bhi jee rahein hain.

Kisi aur ka na sahi, unka to saath dein jinhone aapka saath diya hai.

Ek raja hain ab aap, aapke jeevan par keval aapke mata-pita ka, humaara ya kuch logoan ka nahi, apitu aapki praja ka bhi adhikaar hai.

Isiliye hum aapse anurodh karte hain ki swayam ko akela na samajhein... Aap jaise bhi hain, hum aapse humesha prem karte rahe hain, karte hain, aur sada ke liye karte rahenge,” (We cannot change what has already happened. That’s the thing about the past — no matter how bad it was, it never returns. I’ll not say, ‘just forget everything and move on’, because those are just words people say. Just as I cannot forget certain memories, perhaps you may never be able to rise above these experiences throughout your life.

But for me, a wise person is the one who doesn’t let even the stains of past tears touch their future.

You are wise, older than me, and have encountered many kinds of people. You understand better than I do what is right and wrong for your future and our future.

Your life and the place you’ve reached are entirely the result of your capability and hard work. No one else has contributed to that.

So why are you destroying your life for someone else? Just look around—people are struggling with hunger, suffering from many diseases, living on even after losing their loved ones.

If not for anyone else, then at least support those who have supported you.

You are a king now — your life is no longer just yours, your parents’, mine, or a few others’... It belongs to your people as well.

So I request you, please don’t think you’re alone. No matter what, I’ve always loved you, I still do, and I always will.) I said, and he just blinked blankly.

Leaning in, I pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, my lips trembling. I whispered against his skin, ***“Praan baste hain humaare aap mein. Aap udaas bhi hote hai na, to aatma ro padti hai humaari,”*** (You are my life. My soul cries even if you are even a little upset.)

He wrapped his arm around my waist and embraced me tightly. I closed my eyes, sinking into him, hugging him tighter.

“I'm so sorry,” he murmured, and I caressed his head gently. I could feel him breathing at my neck, his warmth steadying my heartbeat, and I slowly moved my palm over his chest.

“Humne aapki Holi bhi bigaad di,” (I spoiled your Holi.) he added with guilt.

I let out a soft chuckle, and a fresh tear escaped down my cheek. Lifting my head, I looked into his eyes and spoke quietly, ***“Humaare teej-tyohaar to sab aapse hain, Ranaji,”*** (Every joy, every festival of mine begins and ends with you, Ranaji.)

He smiled and leaned in to kiss my cheek softly, slowly, yet full of love. His lips trailed from my jawline to my ear, and in a breath that made my skin rise in goosebumps, he whispered, ***“Humein apne rang mein rang lo aaj, Nandani”*** (Colour me in your colours, Nandani.)

His deep voice sent a shiver down my spine, and my lashes fluttered shut. ***“Hum aapke atirikt kisiko smaran nahi rakhna chaahte... sab bhool jana chaahte hain,”*** (I don’t want to remember anything but you... I want to forget everything else.)

His breath swept along my ear and neck, sending waves of warmth through me.

“Rudra,” I breathed out, lifting my gaze to his.

I could feel the heat of his breath against my face as our foreheads brushed. I shivered when he whispered, “I don’t want to sleep tonight. I want to hold you so close that all I could breathe, see, hear, feel, is you. I want to be wrapped in you in every dimension. I’ve never felt this before, Nandani. Before, I wanted you. But now, tonight... I need you like water. Like air,” he said, inching closer, making me shift to the centre of the bed.

Darkness had filled the chamber, blurring what I saw and sharpening what I felt.

“I know I may be too old to crave like this... but right now, I ache for something—something that holds your scent, your presence. I want more, but not here... not in your parents’ home,” His voice lowered into a soft murmur as I felt his fingers delicately tugging at the threads of my blouse.

My lips parted, and I blinked, nerves fluttering in my stomach. “Rudra…” I whispered, realising what he meant.

He loosened the final string and moved me gently, guiding me to lie back on the bed. In the dim golden glow, I saw his face and eyes full of longing, love, and something deeper.

I felt timid, overwhelmingly so, watching his swollen, exhausted eyes trace over my body. His fingers moved slowly, carefully sliding my blouse off my shoulder, as if I were something fragile-a delicate little doll in his care.

My breath hitched the moment the fabric left my skin. A soft chill kissed my body, and my nipples rose instantly with the sensation.

My hands rested beside my waist, still and open, allowing him to see me fully. His gaze moved over my chest, then down to my waist. When his palm finally settled on my midriff, covering the space between my ribs and navel, I shivered from the heat of his touch. It was gentle, thoughtful, and sensual.

I looked up at his eyes, still holding the ache of everything that had happened. They seemed broken, confused, and afraid. I reached up and brushed my fingers along his cheek.

He closed his eyes for a brief second, exhaling deeply at my touch. “I want to suck,” he whispered, barely audible.

I blinked, giving a small nod, and he leaned in, lying beside me. He softly turned me onto my side and nestled close, burying his face in the comfort of my chest. Slowly, he pulled the comforter up to my waist, wrapping us in warmth. I could feel him breathe against my skin, the heat of his breath hovering over my bosom.

I shut my eyes and wrapped an arm around his neck, pressing a tender kiss into his hair. My fingers ran through the back of his head gently, and my lips curved into a soft smile when I felt his mouth cupping my nipple.

I bit my lower lip, trying to suppress the moan building in my throat.

The night enveloped us in cold air flowing through the windows, warmth under the covers, our bare chests touching, a peaceful intimacy, and the torn layer of lies.

It made me smile as he held onto me tighter, sucking my nipple gently, like a baby, and kept licking, touching, and massaging my bosom until he finally drifted off to sleep. And I, too, let go, wrapped in silence, my hand still resting on his hair.

I woke at dawn, barely light outside, to the same warmth and tenderness at my chest. He was still playing with my nipple, half asleep, half awake.

I stretched my arms with a faint smile, which made the bud slip from his lips, and I whispered teasingly, “Not fed up yet?”

He opened one eye, smiling sleepily. “Not getting anytime soon,” he murmured, then closed his eyes again, pulling me closer and taking my nipple back into his mouth.

I chuckled softly and turned my face away, gently pushing his head aside. “It’s hurting now, Rudra,” I whispered.

But he caught my hand and pulled me back, making me lie flat on the bed. Hovering above me, he looked into my eyes and teased, “It’s tasty.”

Without giving me a chance to respond, he leaned down again and cupped my nipple with his lips.

I inhaled sharply, a half-laugh escaping as I closed my eyes. “You’re behaving like a baby,” I said.

He cupped my bosom with one hand and murmured against my skin, “Yes, your baby... a new life,”

I let out a deeper chuckle and pushed his face away once more. “Please, it’s hurting now,”

He finally lay on his side, and I quickly pulled the comforter up over my breasts, covering myself.

“Let me sleep for a bit,” I muttered, turning my back to him.

But he immediately slipped closer and hugged me from behind.

I shut my eyes again, trying to fall back asleep as it was still early in the morning, but his voice came softly near my ear, “Looking at your beautiful face… I just remembered yesterday was Holi. And I didn’t even get the chance to colour my wife,”

I sighed and mumbled, half-drowsy, “Not now, Rudra. I’m really tired,”

I was nearly asleep, but the moment I heard him quietly slip out of bed, I became alert. His footsteps were soft, but I could tell he walked towards the dressing table. And I heard the faint clink of bangles and jewellery being moved, and then his quiet return.

He sat behind me and gently touched my cheek. “I hope you’re not wasting my vermillion, Rudra,” I said sleepily, sensing his smile even without turning to look.

He raked his finger lightly down my arm, from my neck to my shoulder, and down to my fingertips. I slowly blinked my eyes open, following the movement.

My skin… it was streaked in deep red. He had coloured me with vermilion.

I looked up at him. “I don't want to play now,” I whined, furrowing my eyebrows.

He chuckled and, gently cupping my neck, tilted my face toward him before leaning in to playfully peck my lips.

“Don’t sleep, Nandani, please,” he muttered softly, and I closed my eyes, replying in a sleepy murmur, “What am I supposed to do then, Rudra, if not sleep?

He kissed the corner of my lips and muttered gently, “Maybe… feed me a little more.”

My eyes flew open, and I glared at him, annoyed.

Throwing off the comforter, I pointed at my sore nipples with a frown. “Look at these. These bruises prove how much I've already fed you, with no milk!”

He chuckled, moving toward me, eyes locked with mine, and softly cupped my breast again. “This one now,” he said, without missing a beat.

I let out an irritated breath. “Fine then. Lie on this side, I want to sleep.”

He shifted, and I turned on my side to face him. Pulling the comforter up to my shoulder, I relaxed, feeling used to his touch now, and comforted by it rather than aroused.

And, I didn't realise when I dozed back again to sleep.

When I woke up a while later, he was still asleep. His face was relaxed, and a bit of drool was at the corner of his mouth. I smiled widely. Leaning in, I kissed his hair softly.

As I moved to get out of bed, he immediately pulled me back into his arms. “You’re not sleeping?” I asked softly.

Without a word, he took my nipple into his mouth again. “Your kiss woke me up,” he mumbled sleepily. “I love you…” He said, looking up at me with half-lidded eyes. “I want to take you back home,” he breathed sensually.

I smiled weakly and asked, “Why so?”

He pressed his face against my chest and replied in a quiet murmur, “I want to break this restraint I’m holding onto. And I can’t let you fall sick here, in your parents’ home.”

A deep shiver ran down my spine.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

She froze. Surprise lit up her eyes, and her cheeks flushed pink. “What?” she asked, her mouth agape.

I sat up and looked at her, repeating my words calmly. “I want to break my controlling period… and I want us to consummate our marriage,”

Her eyes widened even more, and she immediately stepped down from the bed, looking terrified.

But I held her hand before she could move more than a few feet. “Heyyy…” I said softly.

She turned to look at me, her lips visibly trembling. “Are you mad? Co… con… consummation? Are you mad?” she stammered, grabbing her blouse with shaky hands. Sliding her arms into it, she adjusted it over her chest and pulled her hair forward, but struggled to tie it.

Seeing her jittery like that, I stood up and walked behind her. Gently, I took the strings from her hands. ***“Lagta hai aapki neend udd gayi,”*** (Seems like you’re not sleepy anymore.) I said as I tied the blouse for her.

She lowered her gaze, her voice uncertain. “You have… worked very, very hard for this. You can’t… You shouldn’t break it midway. Talk to your Guruji first.”

I exhaled deeply and sat back on the bed after tying the strings. She turned towards me, and I met her gaze and spoke, “The controlling period wasn’t just about becoming king. It did help build the discipline a king should have, but that wasn’t the main reason. The main reason was to change the future—a future predicted by a fortune-teller. He said a great war would happen. A war that would change lives. And he said that… I would lose it. So my Guruji began searching for a way out. And the best solution was celibacy. A sacrifice to build absolute discipline to erase all desires, to control every emotion that could lead to destruction. He especially warned against women, love, sex, and any form of Kama.” I paused, heaving out a sigh.

Then added, “But now that I know there won’t be any war as your father and I are heading towards a peace treaty, this isn’t necessary anymore. And even if it is, I no longer want to continue. I want to leave behind everything that started with my father, everything connected to him. I want to rule as a king on my terms, with my learnings, not with borrowed sacrifices.” Once I was done speaking, she stepped closer and knelt before me.

Holding my hand, she looked straight into my eyes. She shook her head gently and said, “I know you’re capable of anything, and I believe you can do it. But still… this is something your Guruji should decide. Don’t let your sacrifice go in vain just because you’re heartbroken and upset right now.”

I shook my head. “I’ve made up my mind, Nandani,” I declared.

She lowered her gaze and slowly stood up. “Then… It’s a no,” she whispered, turning to walk away.

My hand shot out, holding her wrist, and I pulled her closer. “What do you mean it’s a no?” I asked, my voice low.

She looked into my eyes and took a deep breath. “Finish what you started. If you break your controlling period now, when your mind isn’t clear, people will misunderstand. They won’t know the real reason. To them, it’ll look like you couldn’t even hold yourself back for a month after marriage. And I don’t want that image of you out there. Not even if the ‘people’ is just one person,”

She blinked, still holding my gaze.

But a sudden knock at the door made her turn. “Yes?” she asked.

I loosened my hold on her wrist as we both listened. “Princess, the king and queen are asking for you and Ranaji for breakfast,” came the voice from the other side.

“Let them know we’re coming,” she replied, and turned back to me and said, “We’ll talk about this later, Rudra,” And moving closer, she carefully stroked my cheek. “I know you’re hurting. No matter how calm you’re pretending to be, inside… you’re just looking for an escape. And this idea of consummating our marriage now, it’s one of those escapes. Don’t rush into this. I don’t have a problem with you ending your celibacy. That’s entirely your decision, because it is your sacrifice, your journey. But not like this. Not when you’re low, broken, and upset,”

She leaned in and placed a soft kiss on my forehead. “No one wants to feel loved by you more than I do. No one is more excited for us to make love than I. But please… not until you feel it’s truly right. Not like this. Not as a punishment to yourself,”

She caressed my chin with her finger. “I love you so much,”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Her fingers gently stroked through my hair as she whispered, “We both should get ready.”

I nodded, feeling her slowly move away from me.

Honestly, she was right.

I was desperately looking for an escape, something that would make me forget everything that happened, something that would distract me from the storm of thoughts I had before jumping into the river. Thoughts so dark and terrifying that I couldn't even put them into words.

Sitting by the bank of the river the night before, I remembered my childhood. And what broke me was realising that not even once were my thoughts free from the weight of revenge.

It was so triggering and eye-opening that almost twenty-nine years of my life meant nothing except revenge.

And through all of it, I never stopped to think about what I was doing to myself. I thought I was focused. I thought I was disciplined. But the more tightly I held onto control, the more I started slipping away from reality.

I realised that my goals, thoughts, and decisions had been so rigid all these years that I had denied changing even the slightest bit.

But everything changed after I met Nandani. Especially after I left her. Everything collapsed.

It was like a sudden flood of thoughts and emotions broke through the dam I'd built over the years. All the blocks I'd stacked so carefully came undone.

And now… I didn't feel guilty or ashamed of saying I fell for her. And I fell hard.

She is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Initially, I used to question why I felt so drawn to her. Why was my heart changing? But now, looking back… I know it was for the best. Maybe the energies of the universe were preparing me for this moment. No matter how hard lies try, they can never overpower the truth.

"Not ready yet?" The sudden sound of her voice snapped me back to the moment.

I found her standing by the mirror, gathering her long, open hair into a bun. She looked fresh from her bath, radiant and beautiful in the blend of orange and red.

I stood up from the bed and walked toward her, unable to stop myself from wrapping my arms around her from behind. I leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to the side of her neck.

"Thank you so much for coming into my life, little wife," I whispered.

She smiled instantly, her hand resting over mine on her waist. "The feeling is terribly mutual, Ranaji," she replied with a soft chuckle. Then she turned slightly to look at me and added, "Now get dressed."

I nodded and walked over to the couch to pick up my kurta. I had bathed the previous night, so I didn't feel like doing it again in the morning.

"I'm ready," I said, slipping the kurta on.

She let out a deep, mildly frustrated sigh as she looked at me, then pulled me by the hand and made me sit on the couch. Gently running her fingers through my hair, she began to comb it with care.

"Iska arth hai ki ab aapne sab kuch tyaag diya," (Means you've given up on everything now.) she murmured, and I chuckled, placing a soft kiss on her midriff.

"No," I said with a smile. "I just want to spend some quiet, quality time with you,"

She smiled in return and stepped back, but I pulled her close again and teasingly nipped her nipple over the fabric.

"Aaouch!" she yelped at the unexpected sting. I laughed, amused by her reaction.

She slapped my cheek lightly and whispered in a scolding tone, “If you do that again, I swear I’ll cut off my nipples and hand them to you. Then you can keep playing with them all you want!”

I laughed quietly and stretched out my palm with a playful grin. “Why not? Hand them over. Give me boobies,”

She rolled her eyes, adjusting her dupatta, and smacked my hand. “Let’s go. They must be waiting for us.”

Still smiling, I stood up, ran my fingers through my hair, and walked beside her as we headed out.

We both walked into the dining hall for breakfast, and I glanced around at everyone already seated, waiting for us.

“Good morning, Bhaisa,” Ranvijay stood to greet me.

I gently patted his shoulder and replied softly, “Morning.”

Agastya also rose from his seat and gave me a nod. I placed a hand on his shoulder as well, offering a faint smile.

“How are you now, Rudra?” Rajaji asked.

I turned toward him and nodded, a soft smile spreading across my face. “Better, Rajaji.”

My eyes drifted to Nandani, who was walking over to sit beside her mother. I watched as her mother leaned in to whisper something to her, too softly for me to hear. I took my seat beside Ranvijay and Agastya.

“Rudra,” Rajaji began, “I wanted to speak to the three of you about something,”

I looked at him and gently raised my hand to stop him. “Please, Rajaji... I’m already overwhelmed with the truth about my father. And now, I’m starting to feel like I don’t deserve any of this. It’s all... too much. Too hard to digest right now,”

His expression shifted slightly, a quiet sadness in his eyes.

“I understand, Rudra,” he said. “It must be difficult to accept such drastic changes. But still, whatever happened—whether for good or bad—it doesn’t change the fact that we killed your fath—”

“I killed him,” her mother suddenly cut in. I swallowed hard and lowered my gaze.

“Rajaji is right,” she continued. “No matter the reason... it doesn’t erase the fact that I took his life. And in this society, peace rarely follows when a woman loses her support system. We made you suffer, Rudra, unintentionally or not. And from the depths of my heart, I want to apologise for everything that happened. We’re truly sorry for your loss.”

Tears welled in my eyes, a heavy silence settled in the room, and then Ranvijay finally broke it. ***“Yeh to maatra ek sanjog hai ki jo hua wo aapke kaaran hua. Jisko jaana hota hai, samay aane par vo jaata hi hai. Kintu khaara satya yehi hai… wo isi ke yogya the,”*** (It’s just an excuse—that it happened because of you

or that you killed him. When someone’s time comes, they go, no matter the reason. But the truth is... he deserved it.)

I inhaled deeply and listened as Agastya spoke, “Yes, I completely agree,” he said.

I nodded. “You don’t have to apologise. If I were in your place, I would’ve slit his throat myself,” I said plainly, feeling a cold shiver run through me. A heavy, thrilling silence followed until I finally broke it.

“Anyway, Rajaji, we’re looking forward to establishing a peace treaty between Mahableshgarh and Suryagarh. Now that we share not only political ties but personal ones too, and since we’re all trying to move beyond a manipulated past, we mustn’t give anyone the chance to exploit misunderstandings that no longer exist,”

Surprised, her father looked at me, then his expression shifted into a wide smile. “Of course... Wow... Yes. I mean, this is the best thing to do. It’s the right step toward a better future,” he said, nodding in agreement.

I returned his smile and looked toward Ranvijay, signalling him to bring the documents. “We’ve already drafted a treaty. You can review it, consult with your advisors, and let us know if any changes or negotiations are needed,” I said.

“Well,” Rajaji chuckled, “I was expecting something good at this festival, but not this good.” I laughed lightly and caught Nandani watching me blankly while sipping her water.

“Also, Rajaji,” I continued, “Ranisa and I must return home today. Our neighbouring states are awaiting word from us. It’s urgent, but I promise to return soon for a longer visit once things settle down.”

And suddenly, Nandani choked on her water, coughing uncontrollably. Everyone turned to look at her with concern.

“What happened, Nandani?” her mother asked.

She glanced at me, her eyes wide, and I couldn’t help the slight smile forming on my lips.

“What? Today? Why?” she asked quickly, still catching her breath.

I raised a brow and leaned in slightly, my tone teasing but sharp. “Why do you look scared, Nandani?”

She coughed harder, shaking her head. “Scared? Me? Why would I be scared?”

Her cheeks flushed a deep red, and I held her gaze.

“Good,” I said. Then, looking around the table, I added calmly, “Also, Ranisa and I have something very important to take care of... before the end of tonight,”

Nandani nearly dropped her glass, her eyes now twice as wide. “What? Tonight?”

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Nandani

Everyone stared at me, utterly shocked and visibly confused, and that's when I realised what I had just blurted out.

I turned to look at my mother, who looked at me, surprised, and immediately forced a wide, fake smile onto my face.

"What? Tonight? Hehehe… Why didn't you tell me earlier?" I tried to play it cool, laughing lightly, and glanced at him, looking at me with a faint smile, as if he saw right through me.

"Yes, tonight. Or did you forget that we'll finally do something you were so desperate for?" He said it casually, but I could feel the heat rushing to my cheeks, burning with embarrassment. I looked at my parents, wishing the floor would swallow me up, the butterflies in my stomach long dead from shame.

"What? Hehehe…" I let out a nervous laugh, hoping he would stop teasing me in front of everyone. But instead, he continued, all too smoothly.

"What, what? Didn't you say you wanted to oversee the reconstruction of the kingdom's outskirts yourself? You requested the head of architecture, remember? He'll be arriving in Suryagarh by evening. Don't you want to meet him?" He said it so nonchalantly, eating berries like it was nothing.

"Ohhh," I exhaled, finally catching my breath. Relief washed over me like a wave. "Right... the reconstruction… the outskirts… yes, of course," I tried to smile at my parents, but they looked at me like I was some fool.

"Why are you acting so silly suddenly, Nandani?" Daadisa voiced, and I immediately shrank into a small, sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry, Daadi-sa… I just don't feel ready to leave yet," I admitted quietly.

My mother placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "You came to celebrate the festival with us, and we are so happy you did. But both you and Ranaji have responsibilities waiting for you. It's better to fulfil those first," she said, and I nodded instantly.

My eyes kept stealing glances at my dangerously calm husband, who was behaving like nothing was happening.

But inside, I was freaking out, thinking of how our first time would be.

This time, it felt different. Real. It was actually going to happen, and that thought alone sent shivers down my spine.

I felt like prey sitting beside a predator. After experiencing just a fraction of what he was capable of, I knew I wouldn't stand a chance. The first time I asked him to make love to me, I hadn't known that side of him. The side I hardly knew existed—the things he was into, the things he had thought for me, for us, things I had never even imagined—not in my wildest dreams.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and reached for a fruit with shaky fingers.

But when I looked up, my heart skipped several beats, finding him staring right at me. A teasing smirk curved his lips as he sucked on a berry. A drop of its juice slid down his finger, and with deliberate ease, he licked it off—eyes still locked on mine.

I swallowed hard, the knot in my stomach twisting tighter. I quickly glanced around the table. Everyone was busy with their breakfast, utterly oblivious to the silent game he was playing.

I dropped my gaze and spotted a banana in front of me. Determined, I grabbed it and peeled it a little too quickly, and then, without thinking, snapped it in half with both hands.

"Kya kar rahi ho, Nandani?" (What are you doing, Nandani?)

A chill shot through me as Daadisa's voice sliced through the moment.

I immediately placed the banana on my plate and turned to her, wide-eyed. "Nothing… nothing, Daadisa," I mumbled, trying to sound casual.

She narrowed her eyes. *"**Ye kya dhang hai bhojan karne ka?**"* (Is that how you eat?)

I just wanted to vanish.

"Ahh… uhmm… sorry, Daadisa. I… I haven't eaten a banana in a long time," I muttered, feeling utterly foolish. My eyes flicked toward my father, who was smiling slightly.

I timidly lowered my gaze, trying to gather myself, when Agastya suddenly spoke up. *"**Bhaisa, bhojan to karne dijiye unhein,**"* (Bhaisa, at least let her eat.)

Everyone turned to look at him, especially Rudra. Rudra shot him a sharp, silent glare and replied in a slow, warning tone, "Who am I stopping from eating, Agastya?"

Agastya gave an awkward smile and quickly looked away—his gaze landing on Ranvijay, who had just finished bringing in the treaty documents and was calmly enjoying his meal.

"Ranvijay, Bhaisa," he blurted, and Ranvijay looked up with furrowed brows, confused by the sudden address.

Just then, my father spoke up, "Alright, I have something urgent to attend to. I request your leave," he said, standing up from his place. I kept my gaze lowered, grateful for the brief distraction.

My mother followed right after. "I need to look into your departure preparations, Nandani," she said softly, and I gave her a small, weak smile as she left. The moment she was gone, I looked back at him, enjoying his grapes again, as if nothing around him had changed.

He lifted his eyes and met mine, and my gaze dropped to his lips, slick with berry juice. Just watching him suck on them stirred thoughts I wasn't ready for.

The image of him sucking me down there flashed in my mind and I instantly lowered my eyes, cheeks burning.

What the hell is happening to me? I shut my eyes, trying to calm my racing mind.

There was another reason why I was so nervous was the fact that I knew our first time together wasn't going to be… easy. I was only twenty-two. He was twenty-nine. We were different in more ways than just age. When we stood together, my head barely reached his chest. His hand could easily span across most of my waist. And then there was the thought that left me truly breathless—how big was he?

He had been in self-control for nearly a decade. That meant he never even masturbated, which meant it would be intense. Possibly rough. Maybe painful. Definitely unforgettable. And maybe… too pleasurable.

I shivered just thinking about it and quickly shook my head to clear my thoughts.

I found myself chewing the inside of my lip out of nervous habit when my grandmother's voice suddenly cut through. "Why aren't you eating, Nandani?"

I immediately lifted my gaze toward her and smiled, trying to appear composed. My throat was dry, but I managed to swallow and quickly began eating.

"I'm eating, Daadisa," I said, forcing cheer into my voice as I tried to focus on my plate, while my eyes kept flicking toward him. He was still playing his teasing game with those grapes, eyes locked on me more often.

"I'm also done," Daadisa suddenly declared, making me jolt slightly at the sound of her voice.

She rose from her seat, and a second later, Agastya stood up too. "I'm done as well, Daadisa. Allow me to help you out," he said with a warm smile, earning a fond nod from her.

I had no idea what was happening. Why was everyone suddenly excusing themselves?

"Bhaisa, I need to discuss the treaty clauses with the official from Mahabaleshagarh. I'll take your leave too," Ranvijay added, standing up.

And just like that, within moments, the dining room emptied, leaving only the two of us behind.

My eyes darted to Rudra, who was still seated and smiling faintly, and the moment the last footsteps faded, he slowly stood, his palm cupping a handful of berries, which he plucked and popped into his mouth one by one as he walked toward me.

He stopped beside me, and I couldn't look away from his lips, wet with berry juice.

"Rudra…" I breathed, my voice barely audible.

He leaned down, one hand resting on the table beside my plate, hovering dangerously close. The proximity made my breath hitch, especially with the attendants still in the corners of the room, watching us.

My gaze dropped, shy and nervous, but he tilted my chin up gently with his fingers, making me look at him again.

My neck tilted back slightly to meet his eyes. My lashes fluttered, heart pounding erratically, and when he leaned in closer, my lips parted slightly in anticipation.

My breath hitched the moment he pressed his lips against mine. He sucked gently on my lower lip, and my fingers instinctively clenched into the fabric of my skirt. My cheeks flushed with warmth, heat rising to my face as he pulled back slightly.

I blinked, dazed, as he asked in a low murmur, “Want to stay, little wife?”

His fingers brushed across my cheek in a feather-light caress, igniting goosebumps across my skin. I swallowed hard and slowly shook my head in a ‘No’. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“Good girl,” he whispered. Then, in a deeper voice, he spoke just one word.

“Privacy.”

At once, I shivered and glanced around, only to see the last of the attendants quietly leaving the hall.

I lowered my gaze as he moved closer and gently pulled my chair, turning me to face him. “Rudra...” I whispered, but the rest of the words slipped away the moment he knelt before me.

He popped the two remaining berries into his mouth, emptying his palm, and I could do nothing but sit frozen, my heart thundering in my chest. Then, he reached for me and settled his hands on my waist, lowering himself until he gently tugged me toward the edge of the chair. My back leaned instinctively against the small couch behind me for support.

I gasped softly when his fingers brushed over my ankle, trailing upward beneath the layers of my orange skirt.

“Rudra… no, this is the dining hall,” I murmured, panic and anticipation colliding inside me. My eyes darted around, but the room was empty, and I felt his lips pressing kisses on the inside of my thigh, soft like whispers. My lashes fluttered shut as my breath quickened. He parted my legs with ease, his hands firm yet reverent on my thighs. My hand gripped the table’s edge, desperate for grounding.

“Ah...” A helpless, breathy moan escaped as he suckled gently on my skin, sending a wave of sensation through my core.

“You smell so good,” he murmured against my skin, his warm breath fanning my inner thighs. His nose grazed along my skin, inching closer toward my core. My back arched instinctively in response.

“Ahhh...” A soft moan escaped my lips when he began to suck gently on the tender flesh, and my hand flew to his shoulder for support.

He deepened the motion, sucking harder on my inner thigh, and my body twitched with the sensation. The sound of my bangles clinking echoed faintly in the dining hall, and then suddenly, he stopped.

His lips left my skin, and the loss of touch made discomfort twist inside me. I blinked open my eyes to find him looking up at me, a smug smile playing on his lips. He sucked lightly on his lower lip, mischief written all over his face.

“Oops. Someone said ‘No,’” he teased, raising an eyebrow.

My eyes widened, and fury rushed through my veins. Without thinking, I pressed both my feet against his chest and shoved him. He lost balance and fell onto his back with a light thud.

“I hate you,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

He burst out laughing, and I stood to my feet, flustered, adjusting my clothes.

“Yes, I said ‘No’—and now it’s an even bigger ‘No’!” I snapped, fuming. He laughed even louder, clearly enjoying every second of my irritation.

“Don’t make me make you beg for it, little wife,” he said with a wicked smirk. “For every ‘No’ you say, the punishment will only get worse.”

My jaw clenched. I stared at him, eyes narrowed, and hissed, “No... No... Nooo... Noooo... No, no, nooooo!” That wiped the grin off his face.

He paused... only to lean on one elbow and mimic me in a dramatic, mocking voice. “Ahhhhhhh, Rudra! Ahhhhhhh! Pleaseeeee, I’m begging you, pleaseeee, Rudra!”

My mouth dropped open in horror. “What?! What did you just do?” I half-whispered, half-shouted.

He grinned like the devil himself, clearly pleased. “I don’t know, but I can sense the future now,”

“You’ll pay for this,” I warned, voice trembling with a mix of anger and embarrassment.

I turned sharply on my heel and stormed out of the dining hall, fuming. My breath came in short bursts as I headed toward the corridor that led to my chamber.

But before I could take another step, a strong hand caught my wrist.

“Rudra—!” I gasped.

He pulled me into my chamber in one swift motion, and the heavy thud of the door shutting behind us echoed through the hallway.

My eyes widened as I looked at him, only to realise he had me pinned against the door. Before I could make sense of it, he stepped closer, his gaze burning into mine.

“What—?” I barely managed to ask, but the words died on my lips when I saw him suddenly drop to his knees.

“Rudra,” I gasped, my voice catching in my throat as he urgently lifted my skirt.

A flicker of protest sparked in my mind, the memory of him mocking me earlier still fresh, but it vanished the moment his mouth found my core.

My back hit the door, and fingers instinctively fisted in his hair, and my other hand clutched the fabric over his shoulder, trying to anchor myself as wave after wave of sensation surged through me.

He sucked with raw hunger, with a desperation that ignited something just as wild within me, making me roll my eyes.

“Ahhhhhh,” I moaned, my voice trembling.

He then, without warning, lifted one of my legs and hooked it over his arm, opening me further. As he edged even closer, I stretched instinctively, the position forcing me onto the tips of my left toes. My entire body felt weightless, trembling with overwhelming intensity.

“Ahhhhhh, Rudra,” I cried out, shivers running through me like currents.

My hand scrambled for the door’s lock, anything to hold on to, to keep myself straight, though it felt impossible. My dupatta slipped off my head and shoulders. My bun loosened, strands of hair clinging to the sheen of sweat forming on my forehead.

“Ahhhhhhhh,” The moans kept slipping out, helpless and breathless, as he kept sucking me—rough and passionate. My knees weakened beneath the force of pleasure, my muscles quivering uncontrollably.

“Rudraaaa...” I whispered his name, barely able to hold myself up.

And suddenly, I felt his palm press firmly against my chest, holding me in place against the door. My hand instinctively gripped over his, my breath catching when he grabbed my blouse, fisting the fabric tightly, clutching both the upper hem and the one wrapped around my midriff in one urgent hold.

“Ahhhhnnnnnnhhhhhhh,” a louder moan escaped my lips as my entire body shuddered. I felt the slickness of arousal spreading between my thighs, dampening my skin with heat and wetness.

“Ahhhh…” My eyes fluttered shut, my head angled back.

I panted hard, trying to calm my breathing, but it was impossible.

When he finally pulled back, I saw his lips glistening, and my knees nearly gave out beneath me. I slowly lowered my foot back to the floor, but it barely supported me. My heart was pounding against my ribs, my legs trembling uncontrollably.

His hand slid from my blouse to the sides of my waist, pulling me even closer. I stared at him, dazed, breathless, and utterly overwhelmed by the chaos he’d stirred within me.

He leaned in again, his tongue dragging a slow, tantalising line from my navel up to my midriff. A violent shiver raced down my spine.

“I was wondering…” he murmured, voice low and husky, “how would it feel to kiss and suck every inch of your body until your ‘No’ turns into a ‘Yes’?”

Just the thought alone sent goosebumps trailing across every inch of my skin.

“What?” I barely managed to ask, and he just smiled, watching me come undone.

My entire body was trembling, my breaths coming in quick, my heart felt like it would leap out of my chest, as if I had run miles.

I didn't know how, but I was getting dangerously drawn to him. So much that everything else around me had started to blur, fading into irrelevance.

It was reckless, yet thrilling.

"I love you, little bird. And I'm dying to make love to you," he whispered, and another strong shiver ran down my spine. I drew in a sharp breath.

Stepping back a little, I clutched my dupatta and tried to fix my tangled hair. "You're making me insane, Rudra," I said softly.

He rose from the floor and walked toward me, gently wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into a warm, enveloping hug.

"You've taken seduction classes, and you're telling me I'm the one making you insane?" he teased. I let out a small chuckle, a weak smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

I knew he was trying his best to tempt me, to seduce me, but I had to stay put. At least until he met his Guruji. A change in place often changes perspective, too. Once we reached there, as he stood before his Guru again, I hoped it'd remind him of his responsibilities—of the sacrifices he'd chosen to make.

A moment of pleasure could easily become a lifetime of regret.

And, being human, we have the ability to think for ourselves. It would've been ignorant of me had I just gone with the flow. There was a time when I didn't know much about him, about his past, but after knowing most of it, I couldn't just let everything go in vain.

Suddenly, a sharp knock at the door pulled us both out of the haze. I took a step back, distancing myself as my heart thudded in my chest.

"Yes?" I called out.

From the other side, a voice answered, "Princess, the king is asking for the Ranaji."

I turned to look at Rudra and raised a brow. ***"Jaaiye, patidev. Aapka bulaawa aa gaya hai,"*** (Go, dear husband. Your royal call has arrived.) I added with a teasing smile.

But before I could step any farther, he grabbed me close until our chests pressed together, my breath quickening in response to the intimacy.

"Aap jitna bhi prayas kar lein, Nandani, humne jo thaan liya hai wo to hum karke hi rahenge," (No matter how hard you try, Nandani, what I've resolved to do, I will do it.) He said, and I inhaled deeply, realising what he actually meant.

I lowered my gaze and closed my eyes briefly, before saying, ***"Jab karna tha tab to aap kuch kar nahi paaye, ab kya hi kar lenge aap?"*** (When you had the chance, you couldn't do anything—what could you possibly do now?)

I spoke in a really slow voice, not for him, but to let out a little of my own frustration.

“What? What did you say?” he asked, and I looked up at him with a faint smile on my lips.

“Nothing. You must go now. Baapusa probably has something urgent to discuss,” I replied with a warm smile. He gave a slight nod and walked away.

I inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly. Once the door closed behind him, I sat down on the bed and gradually lay back.

What are you doing to me, Rudra?

Ever since I first laid eyes on him, I had waited for this moment for us to finally become one. I had cried for him, longed for him. And now, when that moment was inching closer, a fluttering nervousness had taken root in my stomach. Excitement and fear twisted together inside me.

Wild thoughts and nervous shivers ran through me.

How could a man live like that? Not even touching himself for ten years... not eating his favourite food… sleeping on a cold mattress… cutting himself off from the world? And after learning all that, I couldn’t help but feel small in front of his love.

A girl who always got everything without even asking ended up with a man like him.

A true man. Someone so pure, so composed… yet dangerous and angry at the same time. So determined… yet innocent enough to have trusted the wrong people.

The more I loved him, the sadder I felt for him.

Even now, after knowing everything… after realising so much, he was still trying to pretend that everything was normal.

But I knew better. I could feel the storm he was carrying inside him. But I couldn’t even begin to understand what was going on in his heart or mind.

Was he really drawn to me out of love…? Or was this just his way of seeking redemption for everything he did to me, to everyone?

I didn’t know. But one thing I did know, and I could feel it deep in my bones—No matter how much he tries to convince me, I cannot let him make love to me until he’s truly out of this. Until he’s found peace within himself.

“Nandani,” suddenly my grandmother's voice called out, startling me.

I immediately sat up on the bed. “Daadisa…”

I smiled, and she took her slow, weak steps towards me. I stood up and helped her to sit beside me.

“Aapne kyun kasht kiya, Daadisa. Humein bulwaa liya hota,” (You shouldn’t have troubled yourself, Daadisa. You could’ve called me.) I said gently, noticing how she paused to steady her breath.

“It’s quite alright, Nandani,” she replied in a measured tone, her voice laced with worry as she took my hand into hers. “I came to speak with you... about something important,”

I turned to face her fully, the seriousness of her tone settling into my chest like a quiet weight.

“Pata nahi kyun, Nandani, jab se tum aayi ho, aisa lag raha hai ki koi gadbad hai. Sab theek to hai na?” (I don't know why, Nandani, but ever since you arrived, I have felt that something is not right. Is everything alright?)

She asked with a serious tone, and I furrowed my brows. In just a few moments, my mind wandered back through everything that had unfolded since I arrived here, and I realised she must be truly worried for me.

I took a deep breath and looked at her with gentle reassurance.

“Daadisa, aisa kuch nahi hai, sab theek hai sach mein,” (Daadisa, there’s nothing of the sort. Everything is perfectly fine, really.) I said softly, trying to ease her concern, but she simply stared at me.

“No, Nandani,” she said, shaking her head slightly. ***“Kuch toh hai jo tumhe vyaakul kar raha hai... na tum kuch dhang se khaati ho, na adhik bolti ho,”*** (There’s something troubling you, I can see it. You’re barely eating, and you won’t speak your heart.) There was so much worry in her voice that I couldn’t help but smile a little, faintly, shyly, biting my lower lip.

“Daadisa,” I began with a small chuckle, “it’s not what you’re thinking. It’s Rudra. He keeps teasing me all the time. You all see him as this sweet, quiet, innocent man... but only I know what he’s really like,”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Really? He teases you?”

I nodded quickly, grinning. “Yes, of course! He’s always teasing me. That’s all. You don’t need to worry. He truly loves me, Daadisa. He looks after everything: my health, my comfort, my smallest needs. He’s... perfect for me,”

Her face relaxed into a smile as she watched me. “Truly? You’re not hiding anything from me?”

“Absolutely not,” I said warmly. “Why would I ever hide anything from you?”

She gave my hand a soft rub. “Then it’s alright. I just thought, if something was bothering you, I should talk to you.” Without thinking, I leaned in and hugged her. A sudden warmth welled up inside me, and with tears in my eyes.

“I got so lost in loving him, Daadisa,” I whispered, my voice trembling, “I didn’t think about any of you.”

She slowly patted my back, holding me close. “Don’t say that, Nandani,” she said gently. “Love is a blessing. Not everyone is fortunate enough to find someone who chooses them above all else.”

I chuckled softly and looked at her with moist eyes. “God bless you, my child,” she murmured, placing her hand lovingly on my head.

I wiped my cheeks, smiling faintly as I nodded, and hugged her again.

“Chalo, ab hum chalte hain. Tumhe bhi sajj hona hai—samay se nikalne ke liye,” (Alright then, I’ll take my leave. You should get ready too, to depart on time.)

I stood up and helped her to her feet, walking her to the door.

After she left, I adjusted my clothes and fixed my hair. It took longer than usual to get ready, and just as I was finishing up, he walked in, fresh from the meeting.

“Ready already?” he asked, stepping inside. Just the sight of him sent a shiver running through me.

“Ji,” I managed to say, my voice soft, and watched as he walked closer to me.

He hugged me from behind, and my head tilted to the side as his lips pressed against the delicate skin of my neck.

His warm breath danced across my skin, sending shivers down my spine. Through the mirror, I saw his eyes flicker with desire just as his hand found its way to my waist, fingers brushing lightly over the skin beneath my blouse, touching the chain that circled my hips.

Trying to steady my voice, I asked, “Did all go well in the meeting?”

He planted a slow, sensual kiss on my neck that made my skin erupt in goosebumps. A soft hum escaped his throat in response. “Hnn-hnn,” I felt his breath grow warmer, more uneven.

Sensing the shift in his energy, I turned around quickly, hoping to break the moment before it spiralled further. “Are you ready to leave?” I asked, my voice a little breathless.

He looked at me, surprised by the interruption, but nodded. “We are getting late,” I reminded gently.

As he stepped closer, my back hit the edge of the dressing table, and I blinked, my heartbeat rising with his nearness.

“It's already so late…” I repeated softly, but he didn’t stop. His hand slid lower over the fabric of my skirt, tracing along my thigh, his body leaning in, his presence wrapping around me like a storm.

“Rudra…” I breathed, meeting his gaze.

“I want to taste you again,” he whispered.

A wave of nervous heat flushed over me. My lips parted in silent surprise as I stared at him, trying to understand the desperation in his voice.

“Please…” he added, stepping even closer.

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to steady the whirlpool inside me. “Rudra, I’m feeling weak... after so many... orgasms,” I said, barely above a whisper.

He exhaled, resting his forehead gently against mine. “How long will you need to rest, little rabbit?”

My lashes fluttered shut at his soft, tempting voice. His scent enveloped me, tugging at something deep within. I struggled to resist, to get myself together.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes to push him away. “My menstruation is close,” I whispered.

He looked at me with a flicker of surprise, yet something in his eyes hinted at doubt.

“Oh,” he murmured, but his reaction felt measured, almost too composed.

I placed my palm gently on his chest and said with certainty, “Yes. I can feel it… my menstruation is close,”

His gaze softened almost instantly, and to my surprise, he cupped my cheek with tender care. “If it’s difficult for you to travel,” he said in a low, affectionate voice, “you can stay here. I’ll come to see you every night. I promise,”

His words caught me off guard. My heart fluttered. “What?” I asked, hardly believing what I’d just heard.

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “Yes. If your menstruation is approaching, the journey might be uncomfortable.”

I shook my head quickly. “No, it’s alright. I can manage,”

He looked into my eyes, concern etched across his face. “Nandani, come on… I know how difficult it gets for you.”

I held his wrist, reassuring him. “Don’t worry. I’ll be okay. It’s not today, maybe tomorrow, or in a couple of days,”

“Oh,” he said again, softer this time, and stepped forward to embrace me.

His arms wrapped around me, and his hand moved in slow, calming strokes over my back. A soft kiss landed on the crown of my head.

“Come,” he said warmly. “Let’s go meet your family.”

I smiled, and as he took my hand in his and kissed the back of it, my heart swelled with a quiet, contented joy.

We walked together to the main chamber, where Rudra and my father greeted one another with genuine warmth. It felt like the meeting had gone well, perhaps even better than expected.

Meanwhile, I made my way to see my mother, my grandmother, and everyone else I cherished. Their smiles and blessings filled the air with warmth. My grandmother, in her usual way, couldn't resist blessing us with a child.

I laughed at her words, feeling her love, and then quietly slipped away to meet my father.

They all blessed us and urged us to visit again soon. I smiled, accepting their love, when suddenly my father called out.

“Rudra,” he said.

Rudra turned toward him and walked forward, embracing him with a quiet respect. My father returned the gesture, holding him with firmness.

“Take care of yourself,” he said in a low but meaningful voice. “The past does not define you… But it holds the power to ruin your future. Think wisely, and be brave.”

Rudra nodded with humility. “Ji, Rajaji,” he replied.

I watched them, my heart full. And after our final goodbyes, we set off. I sat in the palanquin with tears quietly blurring my vision.

No matter how deeply your husband loves you, a part of you always aches for the warmth of your family.

We returned to Suryagarh just as dawn touched the sky. I stepped out of the palanquin, and together, we walked to our chamber in silence.

“I should take a bath,” I said softly, breaking the stillness.

But just as I turned, his hand gently caught mine.

“I think,” he said, his voice low and smooth, “we should bathe together,”

A sudden shiver passed through me. I drew in a breath and stared at him, unsure if I’d heard him right.

“What?” I managed to ask.

He stepped closer, towering over me with an amused glint in his eyes and that soft, pleasing smile on his lips.

“First, you will bathe… then I will bathe. Don’t you think that will take too long?” he said, voice laced with mock practicality. “If we bathe together, we save water… time… and the energy of the attendants who prepare everything,”

My eyebrows knit together, half in amusement, half in disbelief. Of course, the confusion wasn’t about the words themselves… but the vagueness beneath them.

“Just to save water, time, and effort?” I asked, raising my brows ever so slightly.

He leaned in, his face so close to mine that I could feel the warmth of his breath. His voice was slow, smooth, and soaked in sensuality. “Who knows the future?”

I gulped, my heart thundering. And before I could utter a yes or no, he scooped me into his arms.

“Rudra—” I gasped softly, but he simply smiled. Without a word, he carried me toward the bathing chamber.

When we reached, I managed to say in a whisper, “Put me down.”

He obeyed, gently placing me on my feet. I stepped back, just slightly, needing space to gather myself.

“I need to take off my jewellery… and fetch my clothes before I enter the pool,” I said, trying to sound casual while battling the rising flutter in my chest. Taking a breath, I continued, “You go in. I’ll be back in a little while.”

He didn’t argue—only smiled. “Alright… but remember, I’m waiting, little seductress,”

I gave a quick, nervous nod and slipped away to the dressing room. The moment I faced the mirror, I realised how deeply I was blushing. My skin was flushed, and my eyes were glimmering.

What was happening to me?

I closed my eyes and drew in a long breath.

The night felt heavier than any before. I could neither resist him nor surrender to him. I couldn’t leave, but I couldn’t stay in that fire for long either.

Opening my eyes, I slowly removed my jewellery, piece by piece, each one feeling like a weight lifted.

I had to love him without seducing him, without giving in to his art of seduction, without submitting myself to him.

I changed into a simple white bathing dress that floated around me, ending just above the middle of my thighs. It was light, loose, and somehow made me feel even more exposed. My hair cascaded down my waist. Tucking a strand behind my ear, I walked back toward the bathing room.

As I stepped inside, I noticed a shift in the atmosphere.

The light had dimmed, and the room glowed in the gentle flicker of candles, their golden flames dancing in silence. The warmth in the air enveloped my insides, and almost like a whisper, the scent of lavender reached me.

I paused at the threshold, a smile creeping onto my lips. The tension in my chest melted a little.

As my gaze dropped to the water in the large pool, a wide smile spread across my lips at the sight of rose petals gently floating on the surface.

“Nandani,”

His voice sent a current through me, and I turned slowly to find him standing just behind me.

He hadn’t changed yet—still clothed, and yet something about his presence made my breath catch.

“You like it?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“I loved it,” I replied without a moment’s hesitation.

A smile touched his lips as he stepped closer, taking my hand in his. In silence, we walked together to the stairs of the pool. I descended into the cool water, while behind me, he pulled his kurta off in one fluid motion.

My eyes briefly flicked over his chest, the slight marks of the bruises now completely healed, yet scars left behind. And suddenly, the image of our wedding night flashed across my mind, uninvited.

I blinked to push it away.

He stepped into the pool and moved toward me with a calm surety. Without a word, he guided me gently, sitting down and drawing me back against him. My back met the warmth of his chest, and his legs settled to either side of my waist.

His arms wrapped around me slowly, and he brushed aside my damp hair, and a delicate shiver passed through me when he rested his chin on my shoulder. His closeness, the contrast between the cool water and the heat of his skin, it all overwhelmed me in the quietest, sweetest way, turning me breathless.

The gentle touch made me relax and submit to his embrace.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. “Will you speak to your Guruji tomorrow?”

He placed a soft kiss on my shoulder, and his voice came out as a deep hum, low and content. “Hnnn-hnnn,”

A moment later, I felt his hand move to the side, reaching for the bowl of bathing paste. With featherlight care, he began to spread the sand-hued mixture

onto my arm.

“Are you sure?” I asked quietly, my lashes fluttering under the weight of his tenderness.

He hummed again, the same deep, wordless assurance. “Hnnn-hnnn,”

I felt his hand move gently to my neck and shoulder, his palm large and warm, covering most of my skin with ease.

“What will you say to him?” I asked softly, my voice almost trembling.

His hand cupped the side of my neck, and he whispered, “That I love my wife and I wish to offer her the true earnings of my lifetime.”

My lashes lifted as my breath caught in my throat. I felt his other hand seek mine beneath the water, his fingers intertwined with mine.

“What are the earnings of your lifetime?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “And why do you wish to give it to your wife?”

His breath moved slowly along the curve of my neckline, up toward my ear. I could feel the soft brush of his lips as he murmured against my skin: “My patience. My sacrifices. My self-control. My desires. My strength. My power. My joy. My devotion. My pride. My faith. My happiness. My peace. My freedom. Even my surrender. Everything I am… especially, my love,”

My heart thudded wildly in my chest, each word stirring my insides.

“I want to give you everything that I have held onto, Nandani. Everything,” he continued, his voice low, filled with raw truth. “You see, Nandani, we humans make sacrifices to attain things that are not meant for us, and demand something in return from god. And at first, my sacrifices and control held a different purpose, a different meaning, as if it were just my goal, and I had to achieve it.

But then I met you, and having you beside me, being with you, made me realise that all of this is just meaningless. I saw you being content, so giving, not because you’re a princess or because you have much, but because your heart is vast, because it is in your nature. You gave away your jewellery, your riches, for the welfare of others without a second thought. You didn’t count the cost. You didn’t hesitate. That’s your wealth, Nandani. That’s your greatness.

And here, I became celibate to earn my place as a king, controlling myself, yet obsessing over power. I never even tried to reason—do I deserve this? Am I even meant for it?—But no, instead of caring for what I already had, I was being desirous. I burned for a greater purpose, trying to buy my destiny with futile sacrifices, like I could bargain with god. God, who is the creator himself, has everything, and I, just a human, was trying to offer him something and negotiate.

And yet again, instead of being happy, I demanded more. Why? Just to reach here?

But I would be so stupid now if I kept chasing that goal instead of enjoying what God has already given me, you, my love, you. I have you now,” I felt his lips press

softly against my ear, his voice like a breath. “I love you, Nandani. You are the prize of my decade-long penance.”

He spoke while his fingers feathered lightly against the curve of my neck, making my breath catch.

“Rudra…” I exhaled, barely able to find my voice.

“I want to give away everything I’ve earned all these years,” he said, his voice low. “I want to bear the consequences of my own choices. I don’t want to seek anything beyond what’s truly meant for me. I just want to be content with what I already have. If I lose the great war, then so be it. You are my strength now, Nandani. I want to fight by your side. I want to win, not by fate’s mercy, but through my efforts,”

His words settled heavily in the air between us. I gently held his hand, the surrounding silence echoing with the weight of everything he had said.

My mind began spinning, a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts crashing into each other. He was right; he deserved to claim only what was truly his. But to abandon a decade of penance, a sacrifice so deep… just for me?

No.

“No, Rudra,” I whispered. Inhaling deeply, I lifted my gaze to meet his. “Ten years of sacrifices and struggles… it shouldn’t go in vain,”

Before I could say anything more, his lips were suddenly on mine, pulling the breath from my lungs, making my lashes flutter shut. My stomach twisted, and a wave of need washed over me.

He broke the kiss and murmured against my lips, “You are not a waste, Nandani. You are the reward for my celibacy.”

My lips parted with a shaky breath, and I slowly pulled back, blinking up at him. His gaze was soft, glowing with something deeper than love, something eternal.

He looked at me like I was the only thing that existed. Like the world had melted away, and all that remained was me.

“But, Ru—”

He placed a finger over my lips, his voice quiet and certain. “Don’t worry, little wife. I’ll never force you. But in my heart, I’ve already broken my celibacy of years. And still… your consent will always be the most beautiful thing I’ll ever receive,”

I could only stare into his deep, dark eyes. His lashes, his brows, the sharp line of his nose, everything about him was so charming and pleasing.

The tanned shade of his skin whispered silent stories of his struggles, his sacrifices. But his eyes held me captive, deep and searching, longing for an end… a shore for the ever-floating boat.

He blinked once, and my heart stumbled in its rhythm.

The warmth between us wasn’t just of the body. It was rather deeper, more emotional. We were being drawn together not by desire alone, but by the comfort

of understanding. He was scarred, but somehow, he had already found healing. His gaze carried the glisten of someone who had stopped chasing and started living.

He reached up, his fingers brushing my cheek, my shoulder, the curve of my neck, and it sent sparks racing under my skin.

“There is no hurry, little bird,” he murmured, voice hushed, heavy with patience and care. And yet, I couldn’t hold back anymore.

My lips found his, and what started as a tender kiss quickly grew intense, into something urgent and consuming. I shifted, turning toward him fully, my legs wrapping around his lap as I held onto him tighter. My fingers threaded through his hair, while his arms wrapped around me, strong and secure.

Our breaths grew wild, tangled together through the kiss. His lips dominated mine with a hunger I matched with equal passion. I pushed him against the wall of the pool, tilting my face, and kissed him deeper, more recklessly.

“Ahh…” I breathed between kisses, just as his mouth began trailing down to my neck.

His lips were velvety against my skin, yet filled with a powerful urgency that made my head tip back with a soft gasp. My lashes fluttered closed, and I lost myself in the sensation of his mouth claiming every inch of my neck. My body responded profoundly to his touches as I shifted in his lap.

His hand cupped the small of my back, holding me to him. And he kissed a path to my ear, whispering in a slow and low voice, sending a ripple down my spine, “I want to spend the night with you, Nandani. I want to feel you. Smell you. Breathe you. I want you… for the rest of my life. Nothing else matters to me but this distance between us. I want to erase it. All of it,” He gently tugged at my earlobe with his lips, and I shivered in his arms.

He pulled back, just slightly, enough to let our eyes meet.

“Will you?” he asked, his voice steady, yet raw.

The softness in his touch melted me utterly, sending a deep, shivering sensation down my spine. I couldn’t stop myself and nodded.

“Words,” he whispered, feathering his finger over my chin.

“Yes,” I breathed, barely audible.

I then saw how he silently smiled, one that bloomed in his eyes, not his lips. And in that moment, another shiver coursed through me.

“Yes?” he asked again, his voice low as he brought his forehead to mine. Our breath mingled, uneven, heavy, dripped in the heat of the moment.

“Yes,” I repeated, and his hand slid along the curve of my lower back, drawing me even closer to him. The other hand moved upward, sensually trailing along my collarbone, gently pushing my damp hair back from my shoulder. He cupped my jaw with the gentlest hold, and his thumb grazed my lips, and his eyes fixed there, dark with hunger.

“Yes?” he whispered again, making me blink nervously, trembling under the weight of his gaze.

He inched forward, closing the gap between us. His fingers cupped my neck as he guided my lips to his. The delicate kiss had our breaths become one, tangled, harmoniously rising with the quiet storm building between us.

“Yes,” I breathed again, this time like a plea, like a confession torn from the depths of my heart.

I shifted in his lap when his hand moved slowly from the base of my spine and slid up to my bosom. He placed his palm over my right breast, cupping it over the soaked fabric clinging to me. The contact was feather-light, yet my breath hitched. My stomach twisted wildly with butterflies fluttering, desperate to be freed.

And though we’d shared so much of ourselves, this felt different, more intimate, sensual than ever before. My body ached, not just with desire but with overwhelming emotions.

The wetness gathered in my core was no longer just from the bathwater. It was him.

I felt his lips gently teasing the underside of my chin, his fingers slowly tangled in my hair, guiding my head back in a soft, controlled arch.

A sudden shiver ran through my spine as his lips landed in the dip between my collarbones. I could feel the roughness of his stubble grazing my bare skin.

“Rudra,” I gasped, my breath caught in the surge of sensation.

His tongue traced a sensual, wet line across my skin, slow and deliberate. My lashes fluttered shut, and my hands clenched against his shoulders. The way his mouth emitted heat while he suckled my neck made my breathing grow heavier, my body more responsive.

He loosened his grip on my hair only to lean further in, trailing his lips lower, placing an open-mouthed kiss at the base of my neck. Slowly he pulled the flesh, sucking it, soft at first, then growing deeper, hungrier, almost possessive. My fingers slid up into his hair as I gasped again.

“Ahhh…”

The sting of his kiss grew intensely, blended with the pleasure, making me arch my back. His arm snaked around my nape, holding me in place, firm yet gentle, and my pulse thudded against his mouth.

As he slowed, finally letting go, I blinked open my eyes, still breathless, and looked into his.

“You don’t want me to face anyone, do you?” I whispered, feeling the heat of his mark already blooming on my skin.

He shook his head with a teasing smile, and without giving me a chance to respond, dipped his head again to my collarbone. His hand shifted from my breast to the small of my back in one swift, fluid motion, pulling me dangerously tighter against him.

His strong and thick arms caged me in. His chest pressed firmly against mine. And I felt my core brush against his lower abdomen.

The water rippled around us with the sudden movement, but I could barely notice it. My mind was entirely fixated on the feel of his mouth over my sensitive part, this time urgent, wild, hungry. The suck of his lips against my collarbone made me gasp again.

“Rudra…” I whispered, trembling as he continued his passionate onrush.

My lips parted, my cheek brushed against his temple, and my fingers clenched in his damp hair.

As his hand slid lower, gripping the curve of my hip, a tremor rocked through my spine. And then, I felt his hardness pressing against me, sending a wild shiver straight to my core.

“Annnhhhh,” A moan escaped my lips, deep and uncontrollable.

With his kisses deepening along my neck, his fingers teasing my skin, our bare chests colliding with every breath, every inch of us drawn closer by the warm, fragrant water and dim candlelight, I could feel my lower body slowly, unconsciously, grinding against the rigid length of his manhood.

It was the first time I’d felt him like this—hard, craving—and the realisation that I was the reason for it stirred a burning pride deep within me.

He lifted his lips from my skin, brushing them gently against my ear. “Calm down, little papaya... we have the whole night. No need to rush,” he whispered, teasingly slow.

A violent shiver ran through me, but I shook my head. My eyes locked with his, and then I kissed him. Wildly. Desperately.

I pushed him against the wall of the pool, rising slightly on my knees, my body leaning in, my hand cupping his cheek as I devoured his lips with a hunger that had been building for far too long. Our lips moved in perfect rhythm, breaths tangled, bodies impossibly close.

Every trace of hesitation melted. The timidness I had once known had burned away, replaced with the possessiveness surging in my heart. I parted my lips, catching his in mine again and again.

My hand slowly travelled down between us, brushing across the surface of his abdomen. The moment I felt the hardness of him beneath the wet fabric, his hand shot up to cup my neck, drawing my face away just enough to look into my eyes.

“Are you sure, Nandani?” His voice was low, uneven, yet full of care.

“Yes,” I breathed, my voice trembling, pleading. “Ahhh, yes,”

His chest rose and fell rapidly, his gaze locked with mine, searching me, absorbing me.

I reached for his hand, intertwining my fingers with his, bringing it close to my lips.

I licked his finger slowly, letting it rest between my lips for a moment before whispering, breathlessly, “Take me to the bed, Rudra... please…”

He immediately pulled me closer, his arms wrapping around me with a quiet desperation. My hands instinctively circled his shoulders as his lips found mine in the very next breath. One hand held my lower back, drawing me tightly into him, while the other cradled my nape, anchoring my face against his.

He sucked my lips senseless, devouring them with breathless hunger. Our breathing became wild and uneven, and the world began to spin as I felt the shift of his body.

He stood, lifting me with him.

My lips clung to his upper one, while he savoured my lower lip like he couldn’t let it go. My eyes fluttered shut. My body softened, my mind melted, surrendering all of me to him. Completely, wholly to him.

The next thing I felt was the coolness of the floor beneath my feet. As my skin touched the ground, I realised we were no longer in the pool. He had brought me to the bedchamber.

The room glowed with golden candlelight, flickering across the walls. The doors were closed. The curtains were drawn. There was a seraphic stillness in the air. Warm, silent, and utterly beautiful.

As I was taking in the surroundings, I felt his fingers gently touch my cheek, guiding my gaze back to him, and his hand on my thigh. My heart thudded wildly.

With one swift, silent motion, he grabbed the hem of my bathing dress. His other hand slid from my neck down to my leg. And then, he pulled it up and over me.

I was naked in front of him.

Timidly, I lowered my gaze, hiding myself in the curve of his chest. My forehead pressed against his skin, listening to both of our thundering hearts, loud and synchronised.

Even soaked from the pool, I felt perpetual heat igniting between us.

He wrapped his arms around me again, placing his palm firmly against my lower back, guiding me back with slow, steady steps. I felt the edge of the bed behind me as I sat down, my breath shallow and shaky.

“Tie your hair in a bun, Nandani,” he whispered.

My heart skipped. Most of my nakedness was still veiled behind the curtain of my hair. Tying it up would bare me fully to him.

The chamber’s golden glow didn’t hide a thing.

“Bun?” I asked softly, almost a whisper.

He leaned forward, feathering his fingers beneath my chin. I couldn’t help but notice his sculpted torso before me, the deep lines, the veins, the warmth of his presence.

“Hnnn-hnnn,” he hummed in that deep, throaty way that made another tremor roll through me.

Without a word, I reached for my wet hair, eyes cast downward, and tied it up in a bun. Droplets from the ends trickled along my bare shoulders and spine, teasing and tickling, raising goosebumps all over.

He then knelt down before me, making my breath catch in my throat.

“Look at me, Nandani,” he said in a low, tender voice. My name from his lips felt so different, so pleasing.

I blinked, slowly raising my gaze. His fingers cupped my cheek with reverence, and I found myself lost in the dark, infinite depth of his eyes.

“You are the most beautiful woman in this world,” he whispered. And despite the trembling, the nakedness, the storm within me, a small smile broke across my lips.

“Ab to aap kahenge hi,” (Now you’ll say so.) I said softly, and he let out a gentle chuckle, and that soft sound made my cheeks flush deeper. I felt even more timid under his gaze.

“Are you scared, nervous, or... anything?” he asked, leaning closer until our lips almost touched.

I shook my head lightly. “No, just... a little shy,” I admitted. But only I knew how nervous, how vulnerable I truly felt inside.

He reached up and tucked a single damp strand of hair behind my ear. “You don’t have to feel shy, little bird,” he said gently. I just looked at him, staring into his eyes.

“I can’t help it, Ranaji,” I replied in a soft, barely-there voice.

He kissed the corner of my lips and whispered, “Just ask me to stop if you feel even the slightest discomfort, all right, little bird?” His fingers grazed my chin, light as air.

I nodded instinctively.

“Words,” he reminded me.

“Yes,” I managed to whisper.

He leaned in, and the movement made me lie back onto the bed. The soft fabric beneath my skin welcomed me, comforting and cool, making me melt into its softness without realising it.

He wrapped his arm around my waist and shifted me closer to the pillow side. With quiet care, he adjusted the pillow beneath my head.

My heart thundered wildly. The darkness of the night seemed to wrap around us, deeper and thicker with each breath.

He lay down beside me, his head propped on his palm, supported by one elbow. His other hand came to rest gently on my stomach.

I bent one knee slightly, trying to get more comfortable... and maybe, just a little closer to him. He just looked at me, and it made my entire body burn.

With the back of his hand, he lightly grazed my body, brushing from my midriff down to my lower abdomen. Every stroke of his skin against mine lit a new trail of

sensation. I felt beautiful under his touch... slowly aroused.

When I felt his hand slide back up toward my midriff, a silent, building ache rose in my chest. I wanted him to touch my bosom. That desire was growing stronger with every breath.

With his minimal nails, he traced delicate lines along my belly, and it made my skin shiver and tighten. I clenched the bedsheet beside me as my eyebrows furrowed with the intensity of the sensations he was giving me.

His fingers moved in slow, teasing circles around my navel, and his hand glided to the side of my waist, trailing upward to the curve of my thigh, then gently upward again, toward the swell of my breasts.

I opened my eyes slowly to find him still watching me, his gaze soft yet quietly wild.

His thumb brushed the side of my bosom as his palm followed the shape.

I stretched slightly, the ache in my body growing with the need for his touch.

Just two more gentle strokes and something deep inside me began to stir, an itch I couldn't explain.

"Ahhh…" A soft moan slipped from between my parted lips.

He brought his gaze back up to mine, and I bit gently on my lower lip, silently asking him for more.

He leaned in and pressed a delicate kiss to my cheek. That one small gesture made butterflies explode in my stomach.

When he pulled back, our eyes locked, and I felt a gentle, purposeful shift. His palm moved slowly from my thigh to my midriff, pausing… then continuing upward to my breasts, sending goosebumps cascading across my skin.

As his thumb brushed across my erect bud, I blinked, my lips parted, and my heart raced, spiralling into a wild rhythm. The tension, the anticipation, it was all too much, too beautiful.

He, without a word, leaned in and cupped my swollen bud with his lips. And my lashes fluttered shut, my back arched toward him instinctively, surrendering to the moment.

"Aahh…" The moan escaped me before I could catch it.

His tongue moved in slow, deliberate circles, licking gently, teasingly around my brown, hardened bud. As he traced it with the tip of his tongue, his lips seared heat into my skin, building sensations in my body that drove me into a wild, uncontrollable frenzy.

I brought my hand to my mouth, trying to silence myself, but the sensations only grew stronger. My fingers trembled against my lips as I turned my head to the side, eyes closed, lost in the tender fire he was building within me.

When he suddenly deepened the torture of his mouth, sinking his teeth into my skin, sucking me harshly, a louder cry escaped me. "Aaahhh…"

He softened immediately, as if to soothe what his hunger had stirred. All the while, his other hand moved with equal care and reverence, caressing my other bud and breast.

He kept fondling them—calm yet teasing—sometimes pressing roughly, other times cupping them tenderly, exploring every way a man could worship a woman's breasts.

All of it left me burning, aroused, driving my desire to the brink.

I looked at him again as he moved lower, his lips trailing over my midriff, sending shivers across my skin.

He licked, sucked, and planted delicate, feather-light kisses all the way down my body until he reached my lower abdomen.

His hand gripped my thigh, and I felt his lips brush against my inner thigh.

My breathing grew uneven, my eyes fluttering uncontrollably. I could already feel my mind slipping away.

But as his lips began to move toward my core, my heart raced, pounding wildly in my chest.

"Let me see you, Nandani. All of you, please." His voice was slow, deliberate, and the way he said 'please' sent a shiver down my spine.

I curled my toes, my body trembling, and slowly parted my legs for him, feeling the rush of sensations spreading through my nerves.

A surge of timidity washed over me, but I couldn't resist.

"Lift yourself and look here," he murmured against my lower abdomen.

I shifted my gaze from the ceiling to him. Raising my upper body with the help of my elbows, I looked down at him.

I could see my core—my legs spread wide—and his lips drawing closer to it, inch by inch.

My lips parted as soon as his mouth came in contact with my sensitive flesh. "Ahhhh," I gasped, shivering at the touch.

His warm breath against me sent tingling through my entire body, and when he flicked his tongue out to slowly lick me, I melted.

"Aaanhhhh…" A trembling moan escaped my lips, my body igniting with desire.

My brows furrowed, and as I saw him part his lips to press against my most sensitive spot, my mind unravelled.

My heart raced, and my head fell back in ecstasy.

"Keep looking, little bird," he said, his voice low as he shifted between my legs. I angled my face to look back at him once more.

While his lips led me to the edge of a sensational excursion, I held his deep, unwavering gaze. It felt like he was telling me everything without words, as if he loved me deeply and cared for every one of my needs.

He began sucking gently, and I shivered beneath him, my lips parting with every soft, breathy moan that escaped with his each pull.

As the sensations grew more intense, I bit down lightly on my lower lip, but suddenly, without warning, he sucked harder, sending waves of pleasure through me.

“Aaaaaahh……” A loud moan slipped from my lips, and tears pooled in my eyes as I looked at him, my brows furrowing in a mixture of pleasure and need.

“Those are mine to bite, little seductress.” His voice was slow, commanding, and it drove me wild with desire.

My heart was beating uncontrollably as I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the way his lips devoured me.

He continued, his lips sucking me with a relentless rhythm, and soon my knees began to ache, my body weakening under the pressure.

An overwhelming desire built inside me, an urge to feel more, to take more, to have more.

“Fill me in, please, Rudra,” I begged, my voice soft and desperate as I reached for his head, my fingers threading through his hair.

He looked up at me, his face filled with a dark, seductive intent, and took two fingers into his mouth.

It was so formidable, so assertive, I almost couldn’t breathe.

He slowly slid them inside me, and I felt my head fall back, my body arching as the pleasure hit me in waves.

“Aaaaahhhhhhh….” A moan of pure pleasure, dripping with sensual and exotic feeling, escaped me; it felt so beautiful.

I couldn’t hold on much longer before I released, my body shaking with the intensity of it.

“Good little wife,” He murmured, and the words sent another wave of fiery pleasure through me.

He moved his fingers inside me slowly, gently at first, and then I felt his lips pressing soft kisses to my lower abdomen.

“Aahhhhhh…” He pulled back just for a moment, adding another finger, and the rush of sensation took me completely.

“Aaaaahhhh…” The sharp sting of pain almost brought me to tears, but his voice, slow and soothing, followed: “You need this, little bird.”

It sent me spiralling into madness.

I locked eyes with him as he moved upward, his fingers still working, driving me to the edge.

He pressed his forehead into the crook of my neck, whispering in my ear, “Calm down, Nandani.”

My hand grasped his wrist, my body trembling. “Aaaahhhhhhhh...”

He drove deeper, and my heart pounded, out of control. He sucked on my earlobe, his voice dark and slow. “Your voice is turning me on, my little bee,”

I bit my lower lip in response, but before I could react, he suddenly bit my ear.

And a cry escaped me, sharp and raw from the sudden pain, and he warned me again, his voice firm but filled with desire: “Those are only mine to bite.”

Every word, every touch, was a storm of sensations building inside me, leaving me trembling with need.

His fingers moved gently, creating a sting of pleasure that had me on the edge.

“Aaahhh…” I moaned as he sucked on my earlobe again. I tried to pull my ear away from his mouth, and my grip on his wrist tightened desperately.

He pulled his fingers out slowly, making me shiver as I watched him, but he wasn’t done.

He touched my thigh, then my waist, turning me onto my side, pressing my back against his chest.

A wave of timidness rushed through me as he slid his hand from my waist to the small of my back. His lips trailed over my nape, leaving wet, sensual kisses that made my breath catch.

His hands roamed across my hips, my thighs, my back, touching every part of me, igniting sensations everywhere.

My lashes fluttered closed, overwhelmed by the intensity of his touches.

“You smell so nice, Nandani,” He muttered against my skin before his tongue flicked across my nape.

I bit down on my lower lip, desperate to stop the moans escaping from deep within.

I felt his hand slide under my head, cupping my jaw with the same palm. He traced my lips with his thumb, and I couldn’t help but release my lower lip as a soft moan escaped me.

The sensation of his hand gripping my neck made my body tremble, while his other hand rested on my waist, pulling me closer, spooning me.

He sucked the side of my bosom, my arm, my back—each touch sending shivers through me.

Suddenly, he angled my face, arching my neck, bringing his lips closer to mine.

A deep moan slipped from my lips as he hungrily sucked on them. I felt his hand leave my waist, and my mind clouded with the sensations, our bare bodies pressed together.

I could feel him shifting, pulling away his lower body, but he wouldn’t let me move an inch.

“Aaaahhhhhhhh...”

I moaned into his mouth as I felt his thighs press against mine, and I could feel the strong bulge of him against my inner thighs, sending waves of heat through me.

He pulled me even closer, and I gazed up at him with my racing heart. His eyes were dark, dangerous, hair falling over his forehead, lips wet, and colour flushing his cheeks.

Bringing his other hand to his mouth, I watched him as he spat into his palm. My heartbeat skyrocketed.

I wanted to see him, to feel him fully, but as he brushed his manhood against my inner thighs, my lashes forced closed, and I gave in to the warmth and softness of his touch.

A soft moan escaped my lips, my hand fisting the bedsheet as I felt every inch of him.

His lips found my cheek, my neck, my shoulder, my earlobe, my jaw, kissing and nibbling me everywhere as he rubbed against me.

“Aaaaahhhhhh...” A deep, intense need built within me as he continued his movements.

“Calm down, little bird, easy...” His voice whispered in my ear, soothing yet commanding, and I closed my eyes, feeling his cheek brush against mine, sending waves of comfort and love through me.

His hand slid down my thigh, gently pulling it upward. And A louder moan escaped me as I felt him rub harder against me.

He pressed my thighs down again, trapping his manhood between them, the pressure making me gasp.

“Argghhhh...” He groaned, his grip tightening around me.

His hips started to move against me in a slow, steady rhythm, and his hand on my neck made me feel completely caged by him.

I could feel him making his way to his destination, the anticipation building. A strong shiver ran down my spine.

“Let me feel you just for a moment, little wife,” he murmured against my ear.

“Yesssss...” I whispered back, my voice trembling with need.

The urgency between us grew stronger, more insistent.

He lifted my thigh again, and overwhelmed by the sensations, I couldn’t hold back. I released when he pushed into me, the flood of pleasure mixing with the slight sting.

“Aaaaaahhhhhh...” A loud whimper escaped me, my eyes squeezing shut as my heart raced. A brief wave of pain hit me, and my insides tightened, and my body stretched hard.

“Ugggghh...” he grunted against my ear, his voice thick with desire. “You’re so tight, my goodness, I feel like I’m dying already,” he muttered, his words driving me wild, making my moans intensify.

He turned my face to make me look at him, his hand holding my waist tightly against him. I could feel him going deeper.

My hand fisted around his wrist, feeling the mix of pain and pleasure filling me. My head fell back into the crook of his neck, my eyes squeezed tightly shut as I cried out from the shivering pain.

“Aaaaahhhh…Rudra…” I cried with uncontainable sensations.

“Arrrghhhhhh...” He groaned, tightening his grip on my waist. “Easy, Nandani, calm down,”

He whispered in my ear, and I could feel my body shaking with exhaustion, overwhelmed by the intensity of it all.

I kept moaning, and tears welled up from the insane mix of pleasure and pain.

“That’s it, bird, that’s it,” He muttered, planting a soft kiss on my cheek.

He began moving slowly, and I could feel my body quivering with every thrust. He was deep inside me, perfectly caging me in his embrace, and the heat and intensity of it all made me ache.

“Aaaaahhhhhh...” I moaned as he pushed again, my entire body shuddering under him. The movements grew easier, and I gave in, though the sting of it was still there.

He noticed and asked gently, “Is it still hurting?”

I opened my eyes and glanced over my shoulder at him, shaking my head lightly, biting my lower lip.

Suddenly, he pushed deeper, and my lips parted in a sharp cry. “Aaaahhhhh...”

Tears brimmed in my eyes, and I looked at him, wide-eyed.

He smiled softly, pressing his lips to mine, and I muttered, “I hate you...” My voice came out like a beg, full of need.

“Those are only mine to bite,” He whispered against my lips, biting them lightly. Then, he leaned into my ear, his voice tender yet commanding, “I love you, I love you, I love you... I love you, I love youuu,”

With each whispered “I love you,” he thrust slowly into me, and I felt myself teetering on the edge, ready to release again.

Wetness leaked through me, and I moaned again. Suddenly, my knees started to weaken, my body shivering in his embrace.

He slowed his movements for a moment, then gradually increased his pace as the wetness began to build inside me again.

“Aahhhh...” I cried in pleasure, lost in the rhythm as he moved against me, his lips kissing me, his hands caressing me, his voice murmuring soft words into my ear.

Once again, I felt myself barely on the brink, losing control.

Again and again, I was losing count of the moments, slipping further into a state of madness. I turned exhausted, my knees growing weak.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh, Rudra...” I moaned, and he must have understood, because he slowly pulled out, allowing me to lie back again.

With the sudden emptiness, I felt a sharp sense of loss, my mind still hazy and my vision dizzy. I looked up at him as he sat up.

He took my wrist in his hand and pecked my fingers softly. “Come here, Nandani,” He whispered, his voice low and inviting.

I sat up, my gaze lowering to his erection, and my heart skipped a beat as a shiver ran down my spine at the sight of him.

He was huge, thick, the sight of him had my body quivering, and I bit my lower lip, my brow furrowing as I wondered how it had fit inside me.

I swallowed, a trail of fear creeping down my spine.

“This is big,” I said in a slow, unsure voice, and he pulled me closer.

“You already had it, why scared now?” he said, his voice husky. His words were teasing but comforting, and I realised he had kept me from seeing it earlier for a reason.

He gently guided me, settling my legs beside his thighs, his hands holding mine as he placed them on his manhood.

A shiver ran through me when I touched him, and I met his gaze, seeing the desire and tenderness in his eyes.

Without thinking, I pressed my lips to his, kissing him deeply.

He wrapped his arms around me, his body pulling me close as I slowly and gently began to rub against his erection, feeling the warmth and strength of him beneath my touch.

He was incredibly thick and strong. My lips pressed against his, sucking softly. “I love you so much, Rudra,” I breathed against his lips.

“I love you too, Nandani,” He replied, his voice low and full of emotion. “Now, take it yourself, love,” I nodded, shifting closer to him.

He reclined back, pressing his back against the pile of pillows and the headboard, his eyes never leaving mine.

I placed my hand gently on his shoulder, adjusting myself to settle over him.

As I began to lower myself, a sudden pain shot through my body, unlike anything I had felt before.

“Aaaahh…” I gasped, unease blossoming in my lower abdomen. My knees trembled, unable to support my weight.

He grabbed my hips, guiding me slowly down. “Aaaahhhhhh… Rudra,” I cried out, my head falling back as he filled me.

A rush of mixed pain and pleasure washed over me, and I felt myself losing control, my mind swirling.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he gently moved me onto his lap.

“Ahhhhhh…” It hit me deeply, sending a powerful shiver down my spine.

A loud moan escaped my lips as I felt the intensity building. He straightened up, pulling me closer, our foreheads pressing together as our breath intermingled.

The connection between us deepened, the intensity of the moment overwhelming. Each slow, deliberate movement made me feel crazed, my body burning with desire.

He continued moving me against him, kissing me, touching me, our chests pressed together, his lips frequently trailing along my collarbone, sucking my skin.

His hand found my neck, gently choking, creating a delicious tension, earning a louder moan from me.

But he was keeping everything slow, just enough to make it bearable for me.

“Arrrghhhhhh,” he groaned, making me look at him. “How do you feel?” he asked in a low voice, pressing his lips to my jawline.

“Aahhhh… complete,” I managed to say.

“Aaagghhhhh,” he grunted in response, and his grip on my lower back tightened as he pulled me closer—dangerously close.

A deep, electrifying shiver raced down my spine, and I moaned uncontrollably as I felt him reach deep inside me.

My head fell back, and I felt dizzy from the overwhelming sensations. My body ached to arch, to surrender to the pull.

Suddenly, I was burning—every nerve lit alive—as he moved me against him with an intensity that was both agonising and exquisite.

“Aaaahhhhh…” I cried, my head sinking into the mattress, fingers fisting the bedsheet above me.

“My little seductress… ahhhh,” he murmured breathlessly, one hand curling gently around my neck.

My whole body stretched against him as he kept guiding me. It was pleasure wrapped in pain, so powerful that tears welled up and slipped silently down my cheeks.

“Ohhh, my baby,” he whispered, and suddenly gathered me into his arms. Holding me close, he pressed his lips softly to my cheek.

My bun loosened, and my hair spilt down in waves.

His broad, warm palm anchored me to him, resting over my back. My body bounced in his lap, flushed and trembling.

Eyes shut tight, cheeks burning, I moved with him, helpless in the building wave of release. And then, without warning, it all became too much.

The air felt too thin, my chest too tight, and I couldn’t catch my breath. My heart pounded like a storm. I needed to breathe. I needed to come down.

My hips began to move on their own, grinding against him without thought. And then suddenly, another wave crashed over me.

“Aaaaaahhhhh…” I screamed out, body trembling as everything inside me unravelled. My limbs turned to water, every ounce of strength draining from me.

He paused, just for a moment.

"Aahhhhrrrghh,"

Keeping me close, he gently pulled me into his chest, letting my head rest on his shoulder. He held me there, and slowly, he began to move again.

I lost count of how many times it happened. My body gave in to him again and again until I could barely keep my eyes open. The last of my energy seeped from me, but he kept going.

The chamber echoed with my cries, moans, and his groans. I had no idea how much time had passed. But it was well past midnight, and his skin was slick with sweat from the effort.

“Aaaarrghh,” he groaned, his mouth near my ear, the heat of his breath making me shudder. I was barely holding on. My body ached, and my knees had gone numb.

I whimpered as my lower abdomen trembled, too overwhelmed to even moan properly anymore. Then suddenly, he lay me back on the bed and sat before me.

I finally stretched my legs, and a sharp ache shot through my knees, making me cry out.

He was holding himself in front of me, having just pulled out.

“Aahhhhh, Rudra,” I breathed, my voice shaky and my body trembling.

I was beyond exhausted. But he… he wasn’t even close to done.

I reached out, wrapping my fingers around his manhood, slowly stroking him, feeling the heat and hardness of him under my palm.

His lips parted, a deep groan spilling out, sweat gathering at his temples and trickling down his forehead.

But then he moved my hand away, and without a word, he started working himself, his breathing ragged.

I watched, entranced, as his chest rose and fell with urgency. His veins stood out on his arms, his biceps, the sharp cut of his v-line, his thighs… every inch of him was taut with need. He was moving fast, lost in the madness.

I bit down on my lower lip, dazed by his sheer intensity and how wild he looked.

“Aaaaahhhhh… ohhhh myyyy goo…” He groaned, his brows narrowing with tension, and placed one hand on my midriff. “Arrrrghhhhh, goodness,” he gasped, voice wrecked with need.

His hand moved over himself—fast, wild—and only grew faster, more desperate. He looked out of breath, and his entire body began to tremble. His skin flushed, deep red, climbing from his chest to his cheeks, every muscle straining.

He threw his head back. “Aaaarrrrgggghhhh,” groaned and kept stroking himself.

The sound tore through the air, and just hearing it sent a powerful shiver down my spine.

Then suddenly, a drop glistened at the tip of his length. His hand tightened around himself, coaxing it out with one deep stroke.

“Aaaaaggghhhhhhhhhhhh….” His release came in heavy waves, and his skin turned an even deeper shade of red.

Still stroking, he leaned forward, closer to my belly. And I gasped as the warm, thick fluid touched my skin, leaking through him, spreading heat across my stomach.

“Aaaaarrrrrggghhhhhhhhhhhh,” He groaned again, still moving his hand.

More spilt out, and I bit my lower lip, eyes wide, watching my husband come undone for me, on me. A strange, beautiful mix of timidity and happiness bloomed in my chest.

Finally, he stilled, his breath ragged. He panted, his wild exhale echoing around the chamber.

After a moment, he looked up at me. His chest still heaving, but his eyes softened, and a faint smile curved his lips.

“Stay here,” he whispered and stepped off the bed, picking up his discarded, damp lower garment. He returned to clean my belly, which made me smile.

“You look so hot,” I murmured in a low voice.

He leaned in and kissed my midriff. “I’ll be back,” he said, and disappeared into the dressing room.

A wide smile stayed on my lips. I sat up and reached for the comforter to cover myself. But the moment I moved, pain shot through every inch of my body.

“Ahhhh,” I hissed, trying to breathe through it. My body was screaming in soreness, but I reminded myself it was the least expected from him.

Still, I pushed through and slid my feet to the floor, attempting to stand and reach for my nightgown.

The moment my weight settled into my legs, another jolt of pain surged through me, from my knees to my lower abdomen, like a shockwave through every joint.

It almost felt like he was still inside me. “Aaahhhhhhh…” A soft moan slipped from my lips, and I smiled. No pleasure comes without great pain.

“What are you doing?”

His voice boomed in the silent chamber, startling me, and I turned to see him walking toward me, now wearing fresh black lowers.

“I need my nightgown,” I said softly. He smiled and retrieved it from the couch. Walking back to me, he handed it over and sat down on the bed.

I slid my arms into the nightgown and tied it gently around myself, sinking back onto the bed.

He pulled me close the moment I sat, guiding me down to lie beside him. He buried his face in my neck, and I felt myself slipping into sleep without resistance.

“I love you,” he murmured huskily, and I drifted off.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Hardly any time had passed since we'd fallen asleep when a loud knock on the door startled me awake.

I blinked slowly, my eyelashes fluttering as I stirred. My hand reached out to gently pat his shoulder. "Rudra," I whispered softly.

"Bhaisa," came a familiar voice from the other side of the door. Ranvijay.

My brows drew together.

"Rudra, wake up… Ranvijay is here," He stirred, his lashes lifting as he looked at me. Inhaling a deep breath, he blinked again, more alert now.

"Bhaisa," Ranvijay called again, a hint of alarm in his voice.

He sat up straight. "Ranvijay," he murmured, stepping out of bed.

Walking to the door, he opened it, and I could hear the muffled sound of their voices.

"It's an emergency, Bhaisa," Ranvijay said urgently.

"What is it?" Rudra asked.

Ranvijay replied in a quiet voice, too low for me to hear.

Then Rudra turned and came back to me. Leaning down, he pressed a warm kiss to my forehead. "I'll be back in some time," he whispered.

He reached for his kurta from the couch, pulled it on, and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

I sat there in the stillness, glancing around. It was still early in the morning.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I followed Ranvijay into the meeting hall, where a group of officials stood waiting. Their worried, helpless expressions told me everything. Fear hung heavy in the room.

"Ranaji," One of them stepped forward, his voice trembling. "Everything is finished now, Ranaji."

I looked at his eyes, glistening with tears. With a heavy heart, I walked closer.

"Calm down," I tried to soothe him. My eyes shifted to Ranvijay and Agastya. "What is the situation now?" I asked.

Ranvijay met my gaze. "They've crossed the borders,"

I nodded gravely, then turned to Agastya. "We don't have the resources for a war, do we?"

He shook his head dejectedly. "No, Bhaisa. It's only been a month… we can't afford to lose the few soldiers we have left,"

I drew in a slow breath, trying to steady myself.

Abhinandan Mahabalesh… he had become our greatest enemy. His transformation in less than two months still shocked me. Once gentle, kind, and thoughtful, he now stood ruthless, cold, and merciless.

And to make matters worse, the old king, Surgami Dev Singh, had allied with him. That alliance alone had tilted the scale.

I had known about their union even before I left for Mahabaleshgarh during Holi. I told myself I was going to the festival, but truthfully, I went to see if his family knew. If they were aware of what their son had become.

To my surprise, they weren't. They had no idea. Not even the slightest suspicion.

They knew nothing, but while I was there, I learned something far more devastating—a truth about myself. Strangely, I was thankful because that truth helped me make the most important decision of my life.

To lose a war. Because that loss… was my redemption.

I had done terrible things, not just to Nandani and Abhinandan, but to their entire family. People who welcomed me, trusted me, and loved me despite knowing I was the son of their enemy. They let me into their homes and allowed me to befriend their children.

And what did I do?

I made their daughter fall in love with me… only to use her later for my narcissistic intentions. I earned the trust of their son, only to betray him when it suited me.

The guilt drowned me. It tore through every corner of my heart, and the pain of what I had done was unbearable. But now… no more.

I wouldn't survive unless I let go or paid for what I had done.

My redemption would be a loss. A loss that had already been written into the lines of my fate. And if that was the price of my forgiveness, I was ready to pay it.

I had to do it for Nandani and Abhinandan.

“What should be our strategy, Bhaisa?” Ranvijay’s voice suddenly pulled me out of my thoughts. I turned toward him, blinking slowly.

“Our strategy?” I repeated quietly.

“Ji,” he nodded, eyes full of urgency.

“Nothing,” I stated flatly.

“What?”

“What? Why?”

“We have to do something!”

Their voices rose around me, echoing in the tense air.

“No,” I said, looking at each of them calmly. “We’ll not do anything. Let them come closer. Then we’ll request a meeting to express our intent. Mahabaleshgarh is our ally now. Raja Rajvardhan Mahabalesh is still the king, and Abhinandan is his son. If we retaliate now, we break the peace treaty. Do not worry about Surgami Dev Singh. He is already on his last breath… I will deal with him myself.”

Agastya furrowed his brows. “But Bhaisa, at least let us prepare the army,”

I shook my head. “No, Prince Agastya. This conflict is personal. Using the Kingdom’s resources would only escalate it into something far more dangerous. This is my war, and I must resolve it on my own,” I spelt it out clearly.

They exchanged glances, but eventually nodded.

The truth was, I wanted to lose this war with Abhinandan. I knew him, perhaps too well now. And I had wronged him in more ways than I could justify. One of those wrongs was deceiving both him and his sister. That would have devastated me, too, if someone had done it to my sister.

I couldn’t even bring myself to tell Nandani.

That, too, was part of the reason I had relinquished my celibacy.

I, undeniably, loved Nandani, no doubt about that. But I also wanted her to be happy. And no sister could truly rejoice in her husband’s victory if it came at her brother’s cost. She could accept seeing me lose, even smile through it, but watching her brother fall? Not to me. Never to me.

I was wrong. Deeply wrong.

And this was the moment I had to face it, not as a prince, not as a ruler, but as a man seeking redemption. How could I have continued my celibacy and reinforced my power, knowing all along that I had built part of it on betrayal?

I even spoke to my Guruji about it.

When I stood at the river’s edge, ready to throw myself into its depths, I realised something. My life wasn’t mine alone. It belonged first to my people. Then to Nandani. Then to my family… and finally, to my Guru and those who believed in me.

Even though it tore me apart to shift my path, I did. I went to Guruji and collapsed before him, broken. I told him everything, the truth, the betrayal, and my wish.

I wish not to continue this anymore. To stop this sin that was coated in selfishness, self-centred goals, and everything that served only me, and no one else.

When I confessed it to Guruji, he said something that stayed with me.

He said he was proud to see that the stubbornness I once wore like armour had finally faded. That I had grown into a warrior who was no longer fighting for gain, but ready to face the consequences of my own actions. That I had stopped battling fate, and instead, was learning to accept what was meant for me.

For more than half of my life, I struggled, fought, and punished myself just to chase what I believed I wanted. For ten long years, I burned in my fire, shaping myself into someone who could twist fate to his will.

But what would I have truly gained? A kingdom? A victory in war? And what if, after all of it, I was still not happy?

What would be the point, then?

If I had continued being celibate, I would've undoubtedly defeated Abhinandan. But by doing so, I would've lost the one person who brought me peace—Nandani.

Maybe she would've stayed by my side... but the thought of her being unhappy, of her being silently torn from within, it shook me.

I knew Abhinandan was preparing for war, alone in Pratapgarh. And he had every reason to.

Someone who had betrayed his trust, turned his family against him, deceived his sister, stolen his pride, and degraded his parents deserved punishment.

And now that I knew I was wrong, how could I even think of defeating him? I didn't even have the strength to meet his eyes.

"Ranaji…" A voice pulled me from my thoughts.

Her voice. The voice that echoed through my soul.

I looked up and saw her ambling down the stairs toward us.

She looked effortlessly radiant, wrapped in green and yellow attire. Her wrists were bejewelled with bangles, a choker gently covered the marks of last night, dark kohl traced her eyes, a delicate nath[45] adorned her nose, and the soft jingling of her anklets filled the air.

"Pranam, Ranisa."

"Pranam, Bhabhisa." The greetings followed her like a gentle wave. As she stood before me, I couldn't look away.

Without thinking, I asked, "Are you okay?"

My voice was low, almost a whisper. Her cheeks immediately flushed, and she looked down nervously, glancing at the surrounding others.

A chill ran through me as I suddenly remembered that we weren't alone.

“Ji,” she murmured softly, then met my gaze. “What happened, Prince Ranvijay? Is everything alright?” she asked, turning to him.

Ranvijay glanced at me, unsure if he should respond.

I gave him a subtle look, and he turned back to her, hesitant.

“Nothing, Bhabhisa, just something happened in the village,” she heard him say, and silence filled the air for a moment as she looked between us.

She took a deep breath and spoke slowly, ***“Hum Ranaji se ekaant mein baat karna chaahte hain,”*** (I want to talk to Ranaji in private), she clarified.

I looked at her, and soon, everyone began leaving. As the last of them exited, she gently took my hand, guiding me toward the couch. She lightly pushed me to sit, then settled beside me, holding my hand and meeting my gaze.

Staring into her eyes, I felt as though the entire world had contracted, narrowing to just the depth in her eyes.

“What is it?” she asked softly, her voice tender.

I took a deep breath, my eyes blinking as the internal battle waged in my mind—whether or not to tell her. But in the end, I realised she deserved to know.

“Surgami Dev Singh,” I managed to say, the words heavy on my tongue.

She shook her head gently, her expression confused. “Rudra, now your wish has been fulfilled… now tell me, what is the matter?”

I nodded and brought her hand close to my lips, kissing it gently before I spoke again. “Abhinandan,”

She knitted her brows together, and her eyes immediately filled with concern. “Abhinandan? What happened to him?”

I shook my head slowly. “Nothing’s happened yet, but he is preparing for war against us,”

At that, she dropped to her knees before me, her voice trembling. “Please, Rudra, don’t do anything to him. He’s my brother, my half-soul. I know he’s confused and misguided right now, but he’s not in the wrong, please…”

I immediately reached for her shoulders, pulling her up to sit beside me, my hand cupping her cheek softly.

“Are you mad?” I whispered, making her look at me. “Trust me, nothing will happen to him. I’ll protect him—no harm will come to him, not even a scratch. I’ll do whatever it takes,”

She just stared at me, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears. “So, this is why you wanted to end your controlling period... because you knew Abhinandan was preparing for war?” she asked.

And I shook my head lightly. “No, it’s not just that,”

“Then what?” she pressed, her curiosity and concern growing.

I took another deep breath, preparing to tell her everything. “There’s a prophecy... about me.”

“What is it?” she asked, her voice filled with uncertainty. “What prophecy?” she frowned.

“That I’d become a great king… but lose a significant war,” I replied slowly. “And to prevent that, Guruji had suggested I make sacrifices and please the gods to secure victory. That was the main purpose I started the controlling period. But now, I’m the king, and the war with Abhinandan… I believe that is the war the prophecy was referring to. But, I don’t want to win it,”

Her brows creased tightly. “Wh-What?”

I nodded gently. “Yes, Abhinandan has always been a loyal friend to me. What I did to him was wrong. I wronged you, too, but what’s between us is love. And what existed between me and Abhinandan… was also a kind of love. A bond I lost. I don’t want to win and lose him forever. I want to fix what broke between us. Not just because he’s your brother, but because he matters to me. I am the reason his life turned upside down, and I can’t sit back, praying for mercy.” I took a trembling breath and looked into her eyes.

“My Guruji once told me something beautiful. He said, ‘Life would be a thousand times more beautiful if those who wrong others out of pain or emotion simply apologised and tried to make things right, instead of drowning in guilt and sorrow.’ I want to apologise to him, Nandani. No matter the cost. Even if I lose everything, I cannot live knowing I caused someone so much pain. I’m sorry... I can’t be at peace until then.” Tears fell from my eyes, and she hugged me tightly.

“I trust you,” she whispered. “And you will succeed. I know you will,” I pulled back slightly and looked at her.

“But you must promise me something,” I said.

“What is it?” she asked.

I kissed her hand softly and spoke, “You won’t interfere between me and him. Our love is just two years old, but your love for him… it began in the womb. He’s your twin. And if the moment ever comes where you have to choose between the two of us… Promise me you’ll choose him,”

Her face tensed. “But why are you saying—”

“Just promise me,” I cut in gently.

She looked into my eyes and slowly nodded. “I promise. I want things to be mended between you and him, too. And if my interference complicates it, I’ll stay out of it. Not just because you asked me to, but because he is right. And you have wronged him. You’ve won back my heart, Rudra… but now, you must win back his trust as well,”

I nodded, pulling her into a quiet embrace.

One of the things I cherished most about her was her unwavering honesty. No matter how deeply she loved me, she never hesitated to call out my mistakes.

“Now, I have many things to discuss with the officials. You should rest and get some sleep,” I said, kissing her forehead.

She smiled timidly and asked, “Did you tell Guruji?”

I nodded. “He was proud. He said he’s happy that I’m not becoming a king obsessed with victory, but one who values relationships and is compassionate.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

Warmth rose in my chest, and I smiled at his response.

“He’s right. It makes me proud too… to see a king who puts people above possessions,” I said gently, and he leaned in, kissing my cheek softly.

“Now, you must rest,” he whispered, “get over your soreness... and maybe teach me something from those seduction lessons you took.” I stared at him, narrowing my eyes playfully.

“Knowing you,” I teased, “I should probably ask for a refund from that teacher,”

He let out a low, deep chuckle, and I couldn’t help but smile shyly. As I stood to leave, he followed and wrapped his arms around me in a tender embrace.

“Bahut sunder lag rahi hain aaj aap,” (You look so beautiful today.) he whispered. I giggled and tilted my head at him.

“Aapne aaj hi dhyaan se dekha hai humein?” (You’ve seen me closely for the first time today?)

He smiled and replied, “Because I’m no longer forbidden to love.”

I stepped back slightly, looking up at him as he leaned in to kiss me. His lips brushed mine gently, so light that the chill of my nose ring was still felt between us.

“Is it still hurting?” he asked softly.

I didn’t speak, simply nodded, holding his gaze. “Ahhh, my little bird,” he murmured, kissing my cheek. “I’m sorry,” he added in a low voice.

“For what?” I asked. “For holding back?” I asked.

He looked at me, taken aback, brows slightly furrowed. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t ask for that refund after all,” He laughed, making me chuckle.

Kissing my forehead tenderly, he said, “You should go and rest now.” I nodded and walked away.

Returning to my chamber, I found Suman sitting on the couch, watching me intently.

“You look… different,” she said, her brow raised with curiosity.

I lifted one of my own. “Different how?” I questioned, plopping beside her on the couch.

She leaned in slightly. “You're glowing,” she said with a small smile.

I pressed my lower lip between my teeth and smiled faintly. “Really?”

She nodded. “Yes,”

A short pause lingered in the air, then she leaned closer and whispered, “Something happened?” She animated her fingers between me and him, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

My cheeks flushed instantly. Inhaling a deep breath, I muttered, “Everything,”

Her mouth dropped open. “Whattttt?!” I looked at her wide-eyed, wondering why her reaction was so dramatic. But she quickly softened her expression.

“What? Wow! Congratulations!” she beamed.

I smiled, and we were locked in a tight hug the next second. “Aaaaaaa, I’m so happy!” I squealed in a hushed voice.

I knew I shouldn’t be this happy given everything going on, especially after what he had sacrificed for my brother and me. But still, I couldn’t help it. My heart was full.

Then suddenly… I felt wet around my thighs. I pulled back from the hug and glanced at Suman.

Standing up quickly, I slipped my hand inside my skirt and looked at the blood on the tip of my fingers.

“Urrrrghhhhhhh,” I groaned, feeling sick. Menstruation.

“I’ll get you the padding,” Suman said quickly, already moving.

I headed toward the bathing room, and she returned a few moments later. After adjusting the padding, tears welled in my eyes.

I didn’t want it in the middle of everything.

Dragging myself back to the bedroom, I collapsed onto the bed. And of course, the stomach cramps started.

Sometimes I wondered if my stomach actually saw the blood and decided, *‘Alright, time to hurt.’* Their timing was always too perfect.

“You rest here, I’ll bring you something warm to eat and drink,” Suman said sweetly, and I nodded.

Soon, I started feeling cold. Then—

“Aaaaaaaccccccchhiiiiiiiiiiiii,” I sneezed loudly. Great. Cold too.

I buried myself under the comforters, resting my head against the pillow.

Suman returned with food and tried feeding me, but I was already feverish, dizzy, and nauseous. By nightfall, it had worsened.

The whole day had passed like a blur, me lying half-dead, energy leaking out of my body.

“Nandani,” the Voice of My Beloved travelled down my ear, and I opened my eyes to find him standing by the bed, removing his overcoat. He sat beside me, gently placing his hand on my forehead.

“Seems like you’re in pain,” he murmured.

I took a shaky breath and nodded. “Menstruation,”

“And… cold too?” he asked. I nodded again. “Did you eat anything?”

I tried to speak. “Yes… I ate in the morning…”

He furrowed his brows. “Morning?” he repeated, clearly not pleased. Suddenly, he stood up and clapped twice. An attendant entered the room. “Bring dinner for us,” he ordered.

The attendant bowed and left. I watched as he walked into the bathroom.

After a while, he returned, freshly bathed, holding a bowl of warm water and a soft cloth. He placed them on the side table, then sat down beside me.

Sliding his hand gently under my head and holding my arm for support, he helped me sit up and adjusted the pillows behind me.

A small cry escaped my lips. The pain was worse; the previous night's exhaustion, mixed with today's discomfort, had drained every ounce of strength from me.

He softly tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Come, let me help you freshen up," he said.

Dipping the cloth in the warm water, he wrung it out and gently rubbed it against my cheek. The warmth was soothing, and a tiny breath of relief escaped me. I kept my eyes on him as he moved with care, wiping my cheeks, forehead, arms, and hands. I had already removed all my jewellery, not wanting to feel suffocated.

And then my gaze drifted to the attendants walking in with the dinner.

"Bring it here," he instructed, and they obeyed, placing everything beside the bed.

I folded my legs, and he sat before me, washing his hands before opening the dinner plate. He began tearing small bites of food, blowing on them to cool them and gently bringing the food to my mouth.

At that moment, I felt something stir deeply in my chest. I felt so special. In him, I saw everyone I had ever loved—when he gave me silly nicknames, I saw my father; when he cared for me like this, I saw my mother; when we bickered and annoyed each other, I saw my grandmother; and when he teased me, I saw my brother.

A single tear rolled down my cheek. And when he noticed it, he frowned with concern.

"You know how you look right now?" he asked.

I bit my lip and smiled faintly. "How?"

"Like a cute baby monkey," he said, earning an abrupt chuckle from me.

"Seems like you've adopted a monkey then," I said, taking another bite.

"Ahh, yes," he said, playing along. "I've got a monkey, a rabbit, a bird, a cat, a crocodile—and sometimes, a tigress. But most importantly, I have my little wife,"

His words made me smile. "You'll never run out of names for me, will you?" I asked, amused.

"Never," he replied with a soft grin. "But more than anything, you're my baby first,"

Hearing that, my heart fluttered. I leaned forward, broke a bite from the roti, and fed it to him.

He smiled and gently held my wrist. "You just rest, little bird," he whispered.

I nodded after feeding him and leaned back again. He fed me more and only ate after I had eaten enough.

After placing the plate on the table, he washed his hands and removed his kurta. He walked to the other side of the bed, blowing out the extra candles on his way, dimming the room to a soft, warm glow.

I shifted under the comforter as he slid in beside me. When he got close, I instinctively moved toward him and rested my head on his chest.

He wrapped his arm around me, and I curled my leg over his thigh for comfort.

He began caressing my knees, his fingers moving in slow, soothing circles. The gentle pressure eased the tension, and I felt a sense of relief.

“Is it hurting so much?” he asked softly. “Yes,” I whispered, my voice husky from the pain.

“Should I call the physician to prepare some medicine?” he asked, and I shook my head against his chest. “No, I don’t need medicine,”

“Okay,” he said, running his hand over my back, head, and down my arms.

I didn’t even realise when sleep took over.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

When I woke up the next morning, my body felt a little better. The pain had dulled to a manageable ache.

I slowly opened my eyes and found myself still in the same position. His hand was gently resting at my waist, softly tracing circles along my side.

I could hear his heartbeat, and lifting my face, I looked up at him. He was already awake, his eyes watching me quietly.

I inhaled deeply and stretched my arm, slowly straightening my leg, and turned to face the other side lazily, only to feel him shift closer behind me, spooning me.

His cheek brushed against mine, and his fingers laced with mine. “Feeling any better?” he asked, and I blinked slowly.

“This will go on for four to five days,” I answered.

He traced my ear softly with his lips. “You should eat properly and drink lots of water during menstruation. I read that somewhere,”

A soft smile touched my lips as I nodded. “Hmm,”

“Are you not getting late for your courtroom meeting?” I asked, and he pulled back just a bit, nodding.

“Yes, I was just about to get up.” He climbed out of bed, and I watched him walk into the bathroom.

Even though I was more comfortable now, my thoughts didn’t rest. I could sense that he was still worried about Abhinandan, about what was happening outside the borders… something weighed on him.

I stared at the ceiling and let out a deep sigh, lost in thought. *Should I talk to Abhinandan?*

But Rudra had clearly asked me not to interfere between them.

Still... shouldn’t I at least know what Abhinandan truly feels? He must’ve been devastated by everything that had happened. And after learning that, I married Rudra, despite knowing what he had done to me, and forgave him... I was sure he would be angry with me, too.

But I had to make him understand. Rudra had a reason to do everything he did.

Even if the reason didn't sound reasonable to Abhinandan, one mistake couldn't define a person entirely. We all make mistakes, especially when our minds are clouded, when we can’t think clearly or wisely.

Rudra’s mistake was rooted in half-truths and was misleading. And for that, he deserved a second chance—the one I gave him.

I didn’t know what was coming next, but something inside told me things were about to spiral. I exhaled sharply, trying to calm myself.

“You must take proper rest. I’ll ask the attendants whether you ate or not. So, take care of your diet, understand?” His voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

He had dressed for the court meeting and was drying his hair with a cotton cloth.

My gaze softened as I watched his bare chest, firm abs, and strength in his arms. Suddenly, the memory of our night together flickered across my mind. A shy smile tugged at my lips.

But his words brought me back. Wait… he had asked me to take care of myself.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

He glanced at me and sat on the couch to put on his footwear. But his silence… it said enough.

“Where are you going?” I asked again, sitting up straighter in bed.

He stood and walked over to me. “You don’t have to worry. I’m just going to check the actual conditions at the borders,” he said calmly.

I instantly reached out and held his hand. “What?”

He nodded, confirming it.

A wave of worry swept through me. My chest tightened.

“No, Rudra, you know—”

“Nandani, I have to go. The sooner we handle this, the better,” he cut me off, before I could finish, gently holding my wrist.

“But what if they attack you?” I asked, my voice trembling, tears already forming in my eyes.

He took a deep breath, eyes steady on mine. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle everything. And nothing will happen to your brother,”

He slowly pulled his hand away and stood.

When he walked away, I threw the comforter aside and stepped out of bed, desperate to stop him. But the moment my feet hit the floor, a jolt of pain shot through my knees. My legs felt numb, and my body felt completely drained.

A faint cry escaped my lips, and he turned back, hearing it.

“You should rest, Nandani,” he said gently. “I promise, nothing will happen,” he said, and then… he left.

And I just sat there, frozen, watching him go.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I mounted my horse, ready to leave. Agastya accompanied me while I asked Ranvijay to oversee the kingdom's management in my absence.

With a small convoy of soldiers, we set out towards Pratapgarh.

We rode in silence until we reached the edge of the territory, where small hills naturally bordered the land. I halted, pulling the reins tight, and dismounted.

Turning back, I raised my voice so everyone could hear. "We'll stop here."

The soldiers exchanged surprised glances, and Agastya frowned. "But Bhaisa, we're still far from their outpost,"

"I know," I said calmly. "But I'll go alone from here,"

His expression twisted in a mix of worry and disbelief. "No, what are you saying?" he asked sharply.

I met his gaze and inhaled deeply. "You'll stay here and wait for me,"

A beat of tense silence followed.

"YOU WILL ALL WAIT HERE UNTIL I RETURN. UNDERSTAND?" I said firmly.

Agastya's eyes burned with frustration, but he nodded reluctantly.

"Say it," I demanded.

"Yes, Bhaisa," he replied in a strained voice. "We'll wait here until you return."

I gave a final nod and mounted my horse again. Give them a last glance, I rode ahead alone.

As the hills rose around me, the forest grew thicker, the path more treacherous, and the air turned colder and thinner. I urged my horse forward at full speed, my mind consumed by a storm of guilt and seething anger.

Facing Abhinandan again after all this time, the thought churned my insides. So much had changed between us since we last met.

The forest path was the fastest route, though far more dangerous than the roads. I pushed through, branches clawing at me, hooves pounding against the uneven ground. Then, without warning, the air shifted.

My horse reared up, neighing wildly, and kicking high with its front legs. I tried pulling the reins, but the motion was too sudden, and I lost my balance.

I hit the ground hard, and a sickening crack followed. Perhaps my arm broke, maybe more. The pain flooded in all at once.

"Aaahhh…." A guttural sound of pain slipped past my lips, my vision blurring.

The horse collapsed beside me, groaning. And before I could even gather my thoughts, shadows emerged from the trees—soldiers in deep maroon uniforms, swords gleaming, eyes full of hatred.

Breathing heavily, I raised my injured hand to surrender. I was unarmed, with only a knife at my waist, and outnumbered.

One of them stepped forward.

“Take him to the Prince.”

A tall, strongly built man with a dark complexion towered over me, barking orders at the soldiers behind him.

The word ‘Prince’ slipped from his mouth, and immediately, my mind snapped to Abhinandan.

Swords were pointed at me from all sides. My vision blurred briefly as I tried to grasp what was happening.

Despite the searing pain in my elbow, I forced myself to stand. “Who the hell are you?” I demanded.

The man stepped closer, pointing his knife right at me, piercing it slowly through my chest. “Your death,” he simmered, his voice low and venomous.

I let out a soft chuckle. “You came uninvited.”

He shoved the blade harder into my skin, but I inhaled deeply, puffing out my chest, and stared him down.

Reaching for his wrist, I gripped it tightly and pushed the knife in further myself.

His confidence wavered, and he blinked, unsure. My lack of fear had unsettled him.

“Whoever you are, death, demon, or damnation, don’t test me today,” I warned, voice calm but edged with fire. “I’ve got something more important to do. I need to see someone... and get back to my wife. We’ll play your little game—some other day,”

He clenched his jaw and signalled his men. They began to advance. One of them screamed as he lunged forward, swinging his sword.

My hand shot up, stopping the blade mid-air, my palm pressed against the steel as I locked my fingers around it.

The soldier stared at me, wide-eyed. Now they were testing my temper.

“Now, you all leav—”

A sudden blow slammed into the side of my head.

The world around me began spinning as the pain exploded.

Everything faded in a blur, voices echoed, and my knees buckled. I fell on the ground and everything went dark.

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My lashes fluttered as my head throbbed, the darkness engulfing me in its cold.

I inhaled a shaky breath as I felt unbearable pain, and tried to move, to bring my hand to my forehead, but I was bound. Something around my body was restraining my movements, clamping to my skin, trapping me tightly.

“Arrrghhhhhh!” I cried out, the agony ripping through me.

Slowly, as consciousness returned, I forced my eyes open, trying to look through the darkness.

Silence. A suffocating silence enveloped me, yet it left my body drenched in cold sweat.

When I finally lifted my lashes completely, a sharp ray of light stabbed through my vision, making me flinch and whimper.

Where the hell was I?

I blinked hard and looked down. My wrists were locked with cuffs, the ends of the chains fastened to iron handles on the brick walls. I tried to scan my surroundings, but it was impossible to see much of anything.

Suddenly, I heard faint footsteps approaching and slowly turned my head. The truth hit me like a punch.

It wasn't just any room. It was a dungeon.

Dust coated the floor, insects and spider webs surrounded me, and mosquitoes buzzed in the humid air. I was locked up.

As the footsteps stopped, I heard iron chains rustling, and the heavy door creaked open. I took a deep breath and focused on the figure stepping in.

It was the man I'd met in the forest.

"Seems like I'm kidnapped," I muttered with a smirk.

He scowled, his irritation sharp and immediate. He strode over, grabbed a fistful of my hair, and yanked my head back with a vicious twist, his teeth gritted. "You're alive only because the Prince wants to kill you himself."

I laughed softly. "Your PRINCE—definitely a coward. Do you even know who I am?"

He raised an eyebrow and grinned darkly. "Of course. A bastard son of a sex worker,"

His words sent a wave of rage through me, but wait.

How did he know?

There was only one way. Surgami Dev Singh.

Instead of exploding, I let out a short laugh. "Ahh, yes. That I am,"

His irritation deepened. Without warning, he punched me across the face. A group of soldiers rushed in at his signal.

"Unlock his chains," he ordered. "The Prince wants to peel his skin off himself."

I took a deep breath and waited as they freed me. Their swords pressed close against my neck, my chest, anywhere they could threaten.

"Come with us," the man growled.

I rolled my eyes and followed them. My wrists ached from the heavy shackles still hanging from them.

As we walked through the narrow dungeon corridor, I scanned around—the shadows, the cracks, the path to the exit.

Sunlight struck my face as we stepped out, and I looked around at the ruined fort and the labourers working on its reconstruction.

The man with the grotesque face sneered. “What did you do to the Prince to make him want you dead so bad?”

I sighed. “That depends. Who’s your Prince?”

He rolled his eyes. “Keep your attitude in check, boy.”

I smirked. “I’m not a boy like you. There’s a difference between a man and a boy.”

His jaw tensed, and he slapped the back of my head. “What did you say?”

He asked, gritting his teeth. I clenched my fists, barely holding myself back from tearing him in two with a single finger. But I needed to stay composed, I had to find out where I was, and more importantly, who this so-called Prince was.

I forced a foolish smile and walked with them until we reached an open space. My gaze landed on a tent, and just then, loud moans and sharp cries pierced the air.

“Aaahhh... Prince!” Another scream followed, and I froze. Who was this girl? And who was the Prince? I wondered.

The sounds only grew more intense, and I walked a few steps closer, despite my churning insides.

“Wait here until the Prince finishes his business,” the guard ordered.

I gulped. The thought that this might be Abhinandan shook me to the core.

If that was him… I couldn't believe how much he had changed.

As the cries died, I took a deep breath, bracing myself. The tent’s curtain shifted a moment later, and a tall, half-naked man stepped out. His fingers raked through his hair as he adjusted the low-hanging dhoti on his waist, revealing the carved muscles of his abs and chest.

I squinted against the sunlight, trying to focus on his face, and when I did, the ground swept beneath me.

It was Abhinandan Mahabalesh.

He walked to a nearby vessel and splashed water on his face. Drying it with a cloth, he strode to a wooden bench and sprawled across it with his arms resting wide, one foot propped up over his knee.

“Aao, aao Rudra. Tumhara hi prateeksha thi,” (Welcome, Rudra. I was just waiting for you.) he said casually, with a mocking grin.

The soldiers shoved me forward.

“Abhinandan, what is all this?” I demanded, pointing toward the tent.

He smirked and rose from the bench slowly, eyes gleaming.

“This?” he said, gesturing to the tent behind him. “This is what I call having… fun. Want to meet the girl? Or maybe…” He trailed off, the suggestion in his tone enough to make my blood boil.

I turned to the tent, and the girl stepped out just then.

Shock seized me. My rage surged. I balled my fists and nearly slammed one into his smug face.

“Bastard,” I hissed.

But I stopped mid-swing. I remembered my promise to Nandani: to protect him… not to hurt him. So I held back.

He only laughed, a cruel, hollow sound, and stepped in close, his gaze locked on mine.

“This is the beginning of your end,” he whispered, his eyes glistening with pure fury.

I drew in a slow breath. “What are you doing, Abhi?”

He suddenly grabbed my jaw and squeezed it tight, his face inches from mine, eyes blazing.

“I’m not your Abhi nor anyone’s. Understand?”

I could see the fire burning in his eyes, rage bursting from every corner of his face. His nostrils flared, and the long locks of his curly hair flew wildly in the wind. But I didn’t look away, I met his gaze, holding it steady.

In a slow, firm voice, I asked, “What do you think Nandani will say when she finds out about this?”

He chuckled, low and dismissive, then let go of my jaw. Taking a few steps back, he looked around as if amused by the chaos, and said casually, ***“Kaun Nandani?”*** (Nandani, who?)

Something just snapped inside me.

I took a step forward. “Who is Nandani? She’s your sister.”

He laughed again and walked back toward me, eyes cold. “She’s not my sister anymore. The day she stooped so low—to run after you—she died for me,”

My jaw clenched, and my hand shot up to grab his neck. “How dare—”

But his fist connected with my face, hard and brutal, before I could finish, and I staggered back, stunned.

My lips throbbed as blood trickled down. He’d punched me without hesitation.

The fury inside me boiled over.

I touched the blood at the corner of my mouth, and my breath grew heavier.

First, I’d seen him with Trisha. And now this. His hatred for both of us was louder than words.

But I had come here to make peace.

“Abhinandan, listen to me, please. I love her,” I tried to explain, but he stepped forward, bashing my face with a series of heavy punches.

“YOU LOVE HER?!” Punch. “You love her, huh?” Punch.

“Bastard,” he kept delivering punches to me, until I felt my nose begin bleeding.

I tried to push him off, but he threw me to the ground, climbed over, and grabbed my throat with one hand. On the other hand, punches rained down on my face, hard.

“You used her! You played with her! You’re a bastard, just like your father! A son of a whore!”

That was it.

My fist crashed into his jaw. “Mind your language,” I said through gritted teeth, my voice dark and steady.

He stumbled back, only to charge forward again.

“Mind my language? Hnnnnn... What were you minding when you crept into her chambers? When you slept with her and left her like nothing ever happened?” He slammed me back with another punch. “I trusted you! I FUCKING TRUSTED YOU!” He struck again, his voice raw with betrayal.

“But you… You used my sister… You played with her feelings… You broke her!”

He punched my face again, and the world around me started to spin.

“I… aaamm… sorrryyyy,” I slurred, struggling to keep my eyes open.

Another brutal punch landed, this time breaking my nose. Blood gushed out instantly.

“You just showed me—you’re exactly like your father,”

That was it.

Something snapped.

With the last bit of strength I had, I grabbed him by the neck and shoved him down beneath me. My blood dripped onto him as I straddled him, rage exploding in every punch I delivered.

“Yes, I’m the son of my father, but where the hell were you when your sister was crying, when she needed you the most?” I asked, punching his face. “Where were you? Hnnn? Out fucking your whores?” I seethed, battering another punch. “At least I was there. I tried to stop her from destroying herself. I stood by her when no one else did. What did you do as her brother?” striking him back to back.

Before I could hit again, he pushed me off, slamming me hard to the ground. The chains around me rattled, throwing me off balance.

He towered over me, his fists ready to break whatever was left. “What did I do?” he roared. “What the hell did she do for me?” He kept thrashing me in his rage.

“She betrayed me! She hid your filthy affair from me! She burned down everything—our father's pride, our grandfather’s name—for you.” I tasted blood, as his every word fuelled his punches. “She married the man who ruined her!” Another hit blurred my vision.

“You think I’ll ever forgive that? You think I’ll calm down before I draw every last drop of your blood?”

Blood poured from my nose and mouth. My face was numb, but I forced myself to fight back. I grabbed his collar, yanking him closer.

“Listen to me!” I rasped, my voice shredded and raw. “LISTEN TO ME!”

Our eyes locked. My vision blurred, but I didn’t stop. Not until I said what I had to.

“I know you’re angry, Abhinandan. You have every right to be. But please… just hear me out,” His chest heaved with rage, his nostrils flaring, eyes burning. “You

can kill me. Draw out every drop of blood, I don’t care. But just… listen to me first,”

Something in him shifted just slightly. The tension in his jaw loosened. His grip faltered. His eyes, for a moment, softened.

I took a shaky breath, licking the blood from my lips.

“Nandani misses you… more than you know. Whatever she did, she did it to protect you. Trust me, you have no idea what steps she was willing to take for you. She never said it, but I know. My heart knows. She loves you more than anyone in this world. I… I’m not even close,”

He drew in a heavy breath. His fists remained clenched, but his face changed. “What did she do?” he asked, his voice low, suspicious.

I swallowed hard. “She tried to marry Surgami Dev Singh… to protect you,”

He let out a dry laugh—bitter, cold. “Lies. Lies and more lies,”

I shook my head, weak but determined.

“It’s the truth. She was willing to sacrifice everything—her love, her life—for you,”

He stared at me blankly, as if the words didn’t quite register.

“She did all that to protect you… from me,” he growled.

I looked at him with a flat face. “Ahh… umm… okay, if she did all that to protect me from you, then why?” I asked slowly. “Why did she feel the need to protect me from you?”

He sat down, facing me, and I met his gaze.

“Because I’m stronger than you,” I said plainly. “And if I wanted, I could’ve killed you the moment I saw you. But now… you're her husband. The man she loves. So I can't lay a finger on you—not without breaking her,”

I let that sink in, lowered myself to the ground, and sat before him.

“Yes, you’re stronger than I. But she’s still your sister. You can hate me forever, but you’ll always have to face her. And whether you believe it or not, she misses you. She was devastated the second she found out you were leading the war against us. She was terrified for you,”

He looked down, staring at the dry earth beneath us. I let out a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, Abhi. I didn’t know anything about my father… or the truth behind all this. I deserve your hate—I know that. But please… she’s your sister. Don’t do something that’ll break her even more,”

His gaze slowly lifted to mine, and in a slow voice, he said, “As if she cared about me,”

I moved closer, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“She does, Abhi. She always has. If you don’t believe me, ask her who she loves more. I swear—she’ll choose you over me in a heartbeat,”

A bitter chuckle escaped him. “She didn’t even try to talk to me,”

I exhaled quietly. “She was shattered, Abhi. She couldn’t even gather herself,”

He gave a small, weak smile. “Little did she know about my devastation,” His voice dropped. “She’s selfish,”

I shook my head instantly. “She’s not,”

His eyes locked onto mine. “She is. She chose you over everything else,”

I inhaled sharply, holding my voice steady.

“No, she didn’t choose me. She chose to sacrifice herself, to become a pawn in a political alliance with Suryagarh, just to make sure I wouldn’t get the throne and gain the army so that Mahableshgarh wouldn’t fall into war. She gave up her happiness to protect everyone—even you,” I paused and inhaled deeply.

“Not everything that seems love is a bed of roses, Abhi,”

I saw the moment he swallowed a hard lump. “So… you love her now?” he asked quietly.

I held his gaze.

“I always did,” I admitted. “But I was too numb to realise it,”

He looked down again. His voice was barely above a whisper. “Is she… okay?”

I nodded. “Yes,”

And then a single tear slipped from his eye. “I couldn’t see her like that. And I… I don’t think I’ll ever be able to face her again, knowing I was the reason all this happened,” His voice trembled. “If I hadn’t trusted you… You wouldn’t have come to the kingdom. If you hadn’t come, she wouldn’t have met you. And none of this would’ve happened,” He said. And for a moment, I didn’t say anything.

“It wasn’t your mistake, Abhi. It was mine,” My voice was low, ashamed. “I used everything… and trust me, I’m utterly ashamed. I don’t even feel like I deserve her,”

He didn’t hesitate. “You don’t. You don’t deserve her,” His voice was sharp, filled with rage. “You call it love? That’s not love. She loves you. You hurt her, and still, still she chose you. And what did you do for her?”

I inhaled deeply, the sting of his words settling in my chest. “I know, Abhi. I know. I’m so sorry. But this hate… it should be for me, not her. She doesn’t deserve this. I’m the one who came between you two. I should’ve stayed away,”

He stared at me coldly.

“Yes,” he said. “You should have. And now, you’ll pay for it,”

He stood up. “Before you hurt her anymore, I want you dead. Because once a traitor… always a traitor,”

His voice rang with finality as he looked toward the soldiers. “Give him a sword,”

I shook my head slowly, my voice steady. “I’m not going to lift my blade against you,”

He walked over to the side table, picked up his sword, and pointed it directly at me. “Unlock his chains,”

The soldiers moved quickly, unlocking the restraints. I rose to my feet slowly, wiping the blood from my nose.

“I promised her I wouldn’t fight you,” I said, locking eyes with him. But he was already pacing, rage seething in every movement.

“If you can’t fight, then leave. Let me save my sister from a bastard like you,”

I stood my ground.

“I’m not going to war against you,”

“Then leave her,” His voice cracked with fury. “You’ve done enough damage. Let her go. A man like you, for whom a woman’s grace or disgrace means nothing… who doesn’t understand the limits of revenge, or the value of relationships—doesn’t deserve her. You don’t deserve my sister or any woman,”

I clenched my jaw, exhaling through the storm in my chest.

“And what about you?” I asked, voice sharp. “You’re here giving lectures on grace and disgrace. But what were you doing with Trisha? That didn’t seem very graceful either,”

His face snapped toward mine in fury. In a blink, his hand was around my throat. “What Trisha and I do is none of your damn business. That’s my personal matter,”

I grabbed his wrists and pushed him back, forcing him to release my neck.

“So if a girl’s a commoner, it’s not a matter of grace or shame—but if she’s a princess, then it suddenly matters?” I scoffed bitterly. “Hypocrisy much?”

His eyes blazed. “Don’t you dare bring her into this,”

“I will. Because she’s like a sister to me,” I stepped closer, matching his intensity.

And then, all of a sudden, he let out a cold, bitter laugh.

“You’re furious over someone who’s like your sister,” He said, his voice low. “But you didn’t even care about a girl who was madly in love with you… Who wanted you… And I know—you loved her too,”

I closed my eyes for a moment.

“I’m sorry, Abhi. I’m so sorry for what I did. I could apologise every day, day and night, because what I did was a sin. And I’m ready to suffer for it. I have been suffering. This revenge, this hatred, this rage—I’ve lived through it all. And what did I get?”

I looked at him with broken eyes.

“Nothing. I lost everything. I’m a loser. It’s easy to break someone in a moment, but it takes a lifetime to heal them,” He didn’t say a word.

“Your parents, your sister… even Trisha. None of them deserves the version of what you’ve become. Just because I wronged you, doesn’t mean they should suffer too,” My voice shook now, but I held it together.

“A man who once cared for every woman in his life and respected them, that man wouldn’t do this to a woman who means so much to him. And you mean everything to her. You know you do,” His eyes flickered. “This isn’t you, Abhi.”

I stepped closer, my voice soft but firm. “Tell me, what do you want? Do you want us to separate? If that’s what it takes, I’ll do it. Nandani… she’d choose that over seeing you like this. She’d rather lose me than lose you to this darkness. She’d give up everything before watching you become the very person you’ve always hated,”

His breathing grew heavy. And I saw the crack in his anger. His grip on the sword loosened, and finally, he let it fall to the ground with a soft clink.

“You need to go home, Abhi. Stop running away from your family. What happened to you was not your fault. You were deceived, yes. But don’t deceive yourself now. Don’t deceive Trisha. Don’t deceive Nandani. Don’t deceive your parents,” I finished.

He looked at me. His gaze fluttered with heavy emotions. And then he asked, barely above a whisper: “You want me dead?”

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Nandani

The whole day passed as I waited for him, having heard no news. I stared at the stars while the night grew darker, but the moon shone brightly high in the sky, intensifying a strange fear within me, like a storm poised to erupt. The night breeze felt sharper, like a blade.

Despite the weakness in my knees and the throbbing in my chest, I stood quietly in the corner by a pillar of the courtyard, trying to swallow the anxious lump in my throat.

“Nandani, rest. He will scold each of us if he finds out you haven’t taken proper rest,”
I heard Suman say, and I turned to look at her.

She looked worried, too.

I shook my head in response. “I don’t know, but my fingers are shaking,” I said, showing her my trembling hands. I couldn’t explain it, but my instincts told me something was terribly wrong.

She held my hands and shook her head softly. “It’s just weakness.”

Fresh tears rolled down my cheeks, and I didn’t understand what was happening suddenly. Since morning—since he left—I had been feeling this constant twisting and turning in my heart and stomach. But —

“Nandani,” His voice pulled the reins of all my thoughts.

I looked past Suman and saw him walking in toward me. Unknowingly, my feet began to move. It was really him. He was here.

I saw him and stepped forward with a wide smile spread across my face, yet more tears streamed again. The sound of my anklet bells echoed through the room as I scurried toward him, and he immediately caught me in his arms.

I wrapped my arms tightly around his shoulders, and he hugged me back, lifting me off the floor. My face found its place in the crook of his neck, and with each shaky breath, I inhaled his intoxicating scent that instantly calmed me.

His touch sent a wave of peace through me. I was still trembling, but I felt so calm now.

“Hey, what happened?” he asked gently, caressing the back of my head. I shut my eyes, trying to balance my breath slowly.

“I don’t know,” I whispered, my heart hammering.

My fingers clenched the fabric of his clothes like I never wanted to let him go again. I couldn’t even imagine staying away from him for a single day.

He held me tighter, and I didn’t even realise when he carried me to the bedroom and settled us on the couch, keeping me in his lap. He slowly moved my head from his shoulder to look at me.

He cupped my cheek, and in the glow of the warm yellow candlelight, I spotted the bruises on his face. A tear slipped down my cheek as I reached for him, my fingers trembling.

“What happened?” I managed to ask.

He gave a soft smile, raising his brows. “What? What happened? Something happened?”

I frowned and said, “You have bruises,”

He held my hand and kissed it lightly. “These are the love marks you gave,” he teased, and I narrowed my eyes.

“What? No,” I said, remembering I hadn’t done that.

He leaned in and placed his forehead against mine. I could feel his warm, fresh breath against my lips—he’d just bathed.

“How are you feeling, love?” he asked. My lashes fell shut from the comfort of him being so close.

I took a deep breath as he kissed my nose.

“Who did this to you?” I asked, not opening my eyes.

“Have you had dinner?” he counter-questioned, and I nodded for the reply.

“Words,” he insisted. “Yes,” I replied.

He gently brushed his lips against my cheek, and I clutched at his kurta.

“You’re in pain,” he whispered.

I shook my head. “No,”

He sighed and lifted me in his arms again, standing up. “I can feel your pain in your breaths, little bird,” he said, and carried me to the bed.

Lying me down gently, he sat beside me, and I cupped his cheek. “You met Abhinandan?” I asked.

He smiled. “No. He had already left for home by the time I reached,”

“Really? He went home?” I asked, hardly believing it.

He nodded. “Yes, he went home,”

A wide smile spread across my face as I felt so much lighter suddenly. I laughed, and tears of relief streamed down my face.

“Thank God!” I breathed.

“Do you want to visit him?” he asked, and I nodded eagerly.

“Yes, yes, yes!” I said, my voice filled with excitement.

He smiled and said, “You must leave as soon as you’re well,” and I nodded in agreement.

But — “You won’t come with me?” I asked and watched his smile fade.

His fingers gently played over my hand as he replied in a quiet voice, “I have to handle something. But I’ll come soon—to bring you back,”

I smiled softly. “Ohh,”

It was a strange mix of feelings—excitement, happiness, and a bit of sadness. I would finally see my brother, but Rudra wouldn’t be coming along.

“I missed him so much. I can’t wait. I want to talk to him,” I said, and he nodded with a smile.

“Now, my little liar has to eat,” he said, making me chuckle.

“How do you always know what’s in my heart?” I asked, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead.

“Because you are my world,” His words had me smiling shyly, and I watched him get off the bed. Clapping twice, he called the attendants and asked them to bring us dinner.

Once they left, I grabbed his hand and pulled him closer to me again. “When is Ranvijay’s wedding?”
I asked suddenly.

His smile faltered slightly. “Can’t say anything yet. The peace treaties are still pending, and in the middle of it, Surgami Dev Singh is stirring trouble,”

Furrowing my brows, I asked, “Why don’t you just kill him?”

He looked at me for a moment, then said, “It’s not that easy,”

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely confused. I didn’t understand. If he was the biggest obstacle in our way, why couldn’t we end it? Why couldn’t we just… kill him?

“He’s not just my enemy—he’s my uncle by blood. The husband of Badimaa. And no matter how wrong a person is… life is still better than death,” he said, and I swallowed hard, understanding the weight behind those words.

“So, you'll not kill him?” I asked, and he shook his head weakly.

“When I attacked Suryagarh, I thought he laid hands on you even though I had warned him,”

“But, he did, he was ready,” I immediately explained, but he shook his head again.

“No, Nandani. You seduced him to do that. You used to get revenge on me. You promised him a hair for the throne. He wasn’t completely wrong. You too were wrong, and so I cannot kill him because he was framed between us, by no one else, but you,”

I inhaled a deep breath. “But, Rudra, he is wrong. He’s a womaniser who sexually assaults young girls and treats them like trash,” I said.

“Until proven, he’s not guilty. Right now, he's a commoner, which means he has no kingdom, no support. If anyone raises an objection or files a complaint against him, then I can act. But I cannot kill him just because you brought him between us. That would be wrong,” He spoke firmly, but I inhaled a sharp, disbelieving breath.

“But—” I tried to object, but he cut in.

“Nandani, Badimaa matters. To me. To us. And he's her husband. I can't act against him after knowing nothing happened between you and him,”

Something in his voice felt off, and his words confused me. It was like he was convincing himself more than me. My heart tightened at the thought that he might

have been hiding something from me.

“Did you meet Abhi?” I asked quietly, searching his eyes.

His face flinched, barely, but I caught it. His brows furrowed in mock confusion. “What? No,”

I stared at him, deadpan. “Swear on me,”

Immediately, his hand rose to cup my cheek gently. “What are you saying, Nandani? Of cou—”

“You're lying,” I cut him off, my voice steady. His hand froze mid-sentence.

“What?” he asked, stunned.

I pushed his hand away, a fire building inside me. “You met Abhi. I can tell. It’s written all over your face,”

He shook his head, but it was unconvincing.

“Tell me, Rudra. What did he say? What happened between you two? Why do you have bruises? Did you fight? Is he alright? Is everything okay?”

His hands returned to my face, trying to calm me. “Shhh… Yes, everything is okay,”

I held his wrist, shaking my head. “No. You're lying. Everything is not okay. Something happened. Tell me. Now,”

I said with strength in my voice, and he just stared at me, blank, silent. Tears welled in my eyes and spilt over as he finally nodded. “Yes, I met him,” he confessed softly.

I stared into his eyes, but he lowered his gaze and exhaled.

“What did he say?” I asked, my voice trembling. Fresh tears rolled down my cheeks. I was terrified that something worse had happened.

He shook his head. “Nothing... He’s devastated by everything. And he misses you,”

That broke me. I collapsed into quiet sobs, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“Hey, he’s okay. I promise,”

“He’s not,” I hiccuped.

“I spoke to him. He agreed to go back home. You should go too, Nandani. Be with him... with your family,”

I pulled away and looked at him. “Then come with me,” I said.

“No, Nandani,” He shook his head.

“This is about your family now. All of this happened because of me. Abhinandan is right. After everything I did to you, your family still supported me. No one even asked him what he went through. They chose my side. You chose me—your happiness, our happiness. That was a mistake. Now... now it’s time to choose him. He needs you. He thinks he’s the reason for everything—like I met you through him, like he lost you to me. This is your moment to bring your family back together. Be there until everything is back to normal again,”

I blinked, trying to understand his words.

“He agreed to come home. He wants to give himself, his family... and you, another chance. And I won’t come in between this time. I’ll come when he’s ready to see me. Whether you believe it or not, Nandani, I don’t deserve you. Your family loves you. He loves you. You proved your love to them. Now let me earn the right to stand beside you the way they would have wished,”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t understand. If he’s agreed, why all this? You already deserve me. I’m made for you. You’re made for me. We can’t be apart like this,”

He cupped my hands gently. “Nandani, we’ve only known each other for two years. And in those two years, you’ve left everything behind for me. That’s not love—it’s sacrifice. You’re choosing me over everything else, and that’s selfishness in disguise. Your brother is not okay. Not every war is fought on the battlefield. Some are fighting inside, where no one can see. And Abhinandan... he’s battling something dark. And, for that battle, he needs your support. He is changing drastically, save him before it goes too far. Catch him, bring him back to the family,”

I nodded slowly, even though I didn’t fully understand.

“But I’ll miss you,” I whispered.

He held my hands tighter. “Please don’t. Show your love to your family once more. We have time, Nandani. This time, give it to them before it’s too late,”

I looked at him, my brows furrowed. “You’re scaring me,”

He shook his head. “No. I’m being honest. We’re fine—you and I. But your brother isn’t. Every day, when you look at me, I know a part of you aches for him, that he’s not home, suffering. Whether you show it or not, you love him the most. Remember, it wasn’t for me that you agreed to marry Surgami Dev Singh... it was for him, for Mahabaleshgarh. He’s the Prince. He’ll be king someday. But broken people... they bring more destruction if they’re not healed. Go to him before he breaks further,”

I nodded, slowly letting it sink in. “Okay... okay, I’m getting you,” I said, wiping my cheeks.

“Come here,” he murmured, and pulled me into a tight embrace.

“I’m sorry, Nandani. All this pain is because of me. I’m hurting you even when I don’t want to,”

I cried harder and shook my head. “No, I understand. I understand all of it. I just... I don’t know why I’m crying,”

He chuckled softly and kissed my forehead. “You’re my baby,” He cupped my cheek, lifting my gaze to his. “I just want to take care of you the best I can before you leave,”

I blinked at him, confused, fear flickering in my chest. “What?”

My voice caught in my throat. Something in his words chilled me. Horror filled me.

He smiled at me. “What, what? A husband can’t care for his wife now? Is it so strange to be loved like this?”

He wrapped me in his arms again, gently. “No... but there’s something behind your words. Something I can’t explain. It feels... heavy,”

He laughed softly. “You’re an overthinker, little bird,”

Maybe he was right.

I smiled faintly and rested my head against his chest.

“It feels like a dying heart clinging to driftwood, bleeding from the cuts of iron blades, yet still somehow beating. That’s what it feels like when you’re forced to choose between the two people who mean the world to you. I don’t know the real reason behind this sudden shift… this quiet need for me to go. But Rudra... all I want to say is—” I looked him in the eyes and continued,

“Hum apna hruday aapke samaksh chodkar jaa rahe hain, todiyega mat,” (I’m leaving my heart behind with you, do not break it.)

The silence lingered for a few moments before he suddenly cupped my cheek and pressed his lips against my forehead.

“Never, Nandani. Never,” he retorted, and I could feel his shaky breath against my skin. His voice trembled like he was on the edge of breaking down. “I can die or kill for you, my love,” he said.

I held his hand and intertwined our fingers. Lifting his hand to my lips, I gently kissed the back of it as a lone tear slid down my cheek.

“I will miss you,” I whispered.

He smiled weakly. “Not more than I will,” he replied.

I chuckled softly, and just then, the sound of approaching footsteps snapped us out of our moment. We quickly sat up, straightening ourselves from the warmth of our romantic embrace.

“Bring it here,” he said to the attendants, who entered with a plate of food. They set it down near the bed, and Rudra offered them a polite smile.

“Thank you so much,”

Once they left, he looked at me again and leaned in to kiss me softly. My lips curved into a wide smile, and a faint blush bloomed on my cheeks.

“That’s it. Now you are officially my queen,” he said with a grin.

I giggled, and he reached forward to break the food into bites for us. We fed each other, talked about everything and nothing, just stared at each other like time had slowed down for us. Somehow, the pain of my period was lighter this time. Maybe it was his presence, perhaps the peace.

After finishing, he stood up to place the plate on the table, and I got up too, ready to wash my hands with him. He kept looking at me with a smile, and without warning, he lifted me into his arms.

“Rudra!” I gasped, caught off guard.

“What?” he asked, amused.

I furrowed my brows. “Do I weigh nothing to you? You keep picking me up like I’m a feather,”

He chuckled. “No, I just don’t think so,” he teased, and gently set me back on the bed.

He leaned against the pillows and pulled me into his arms. I slid under the comforters and rested my head on his chest. His fingers stroked my hair tenderly.

“Was the fight bad?” I asked in a quiet voice.

He took a deep breath. “What fight?”

I swallowed. “The one that... broke your nose,”

He chuckled. “Is it that obvious?”

I nodded. “Yes, it is,”

“He was angry. And he should be,” he said calmly.

I blinked. “He’ll get better soon,” I said, trying to convince both him and myself.

He kissed my head. “Yes. And for that, he needs his sister,”

“I know,” I whispered, breathing him in until I drifted asleep.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The next morning I woke up, I was still in his arms.

I blinked slowly, lifting my lashes and inhaling his scent. His face was inches away, and he was already looking at me.

“You’re awake?” I murmured.

He hummed his usual throaty response. “Hmm-hmm,”

A smile tugged at my lips as I closed my eyes again and pressed my face against his chest. His fingers traced gentle lines along my arm, stroking lightly as the morning light grew brighter.

When he finally began to move, trying to slip away, I held onto his hand.

“It’s a lazy day,” I said.

He smiled. “Is it?” he asked, leaning down, and kissed my forehead. “Seems like a hectic one for me,” he teased.

“Just a little longer,” I pleaded, and he let out a long breath, sinking back into the bed beside me.

“Okay, little bird,”

I smiled and kissed his chest. “I love you so much, Ranaji,”

He kissed the top of my head. “I love you, too, Ranisa. I am your King. And if you weren’t my Queen, I would’ve never found the crown,”

I smiled weakly. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better,”

He exhaled. “No, it’s true. I exist because you came into this world from heaven,”

I chuckled and looked up at him. “You’re buttering me,”

He grinned. “Maybe. But it’s still true. I’m the Devil that was left behind after you... to protect you from the world—and from myself,”

I laughed harder. “If you’re here to protect me, then you’re no devil,”

His smile softened, and suddenly he shifted me under him, hovering over me as he cupped my cheek.

“Every protector has to become a devil first,” he muttered.

I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck, teasing, “Oh, really?”

He nodded. “Yes,”

He leaned down to kiss me softly, and I giggled. “Rudra…”

He paused and looked at me with a certain stillness in his eyes. “You know what happens when you call me by my name,” he said.

I blinked, confused. “What?”

His smile vanished, and he turned serious, his gaze softening, and he lazily looked into my eyes.

“When you say my name, it feels like I’m looking into a mirror. All my life, I’ve heard Bhaisa, Prince... titles. But when you say Rudra, it feels like you’re calling out to my soul. Not the King. Not the warrior. Just me,”

My heart fluttered, and I brought my hand up to his face, the sound of my bangles chiming softly as I traced his lower lip.

“Because I love you for the man you are. Not for what you represent. There’s a difference between loving someone and loving the version of them that fits into your expectations,”

He kissed my hand gently. “Sometimes you talk like someone twice your age, little melon,”

“You never get tired of giving me nicknames, do you?” I whined.

He laughed softly. “I love you so much that I see you in everything. If I see a melon, I think, ‘Ah, so cute, like Nandani.’ If I see a bird, ‘So beautiful, like Nandani.’ If I see a tiger, I think, ‘So fierce, like my Nandani.’ You’ve ruined me. You’ve spoiled me completely, little wife,”

He buried his face in my chest like a baby with a playful groan.

I laughed, though I felt a little awkward. He was much bigger than I was, yet he acted like a child.

“You know,” I teased, “if anyone ever saw you like this—behaving like a baby, especially your brothers or Maasimaa, they’d probably die from the shock,”

I said, and suddenly remembered that I hadn’t seen his Maasimaa for a while. She hadn’t caused any problems in our lives since the push-ups incident.

“By the way, where is your Maasimaa?”

He inhaled sharply and looked at me sadly. “I don’t know where she went. She left a letter saying she’s going on a pilgrimage. I wanted to talk to her about the truth of our parents… I’m still waiting for her to come back,” he said.

Something clicked in my mind. My brows furrowed.

“She went on a pilgrimage?” I asked.

He nodded.

I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t quite believe it. A sudden pilgrimage? It felt odd.

Somewhere deep inside, I had a strange feeling that her disappearance might be linked to Surgami Dev Singh being with my brother.

So I asked one thing I wanted to ask. “Was your uncle with my brother?”

His gaze shifted instantly, from sad to shocked. But he answered. “No, I didn’t meet him… but yes, I heard that he and Abhinandan were spotted together,”

A chill crawled down my spine when I came to realise Chandramukhi wasn’t there, and Surgami Dev Singh had met Abhi.

And then Rudra suddenly insisted that I return home.

“What happened, little bird?” he asked softly, pulling me out of my thoughts. I glanced at him and plastered a smile on my face.

“Nothing,”

He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Really?”

I nodded again. “Yes. For sure,”

“Okay,” he murmured, kissing my cheek before getting off the bed. But I held his hand, and he paused, looking back at me.

“What is it?”

I straightened up, and he sat down on the bed again, facing me. “I want to ask you for something,” I said.

“Of course. Everything is yours, love,”

I took a deep breath. “I want you to come meet me every night… and if you ever can’t, I want you to promise me you’ll write to me,”

He furrowed his brows. “What? But…”

He chuckled.

“Nandani, you should be spending this time with your family. Can’t you live without me for even a few days?”

His words stung more than I expected. It wasn’t that I couldn’t live without him—of course I could. But why should I, if I didn’t have to?

“Yes, I can,” I said gently. “But I want to see you, too. You’re my family as well,”

He sighed. “Nandani, you should spend this time with them, not tangled in my thoughts. It’s just a few days. I have a lot of work to do too… I won’t be able to come,” he said, and I knew this was it.

That was it.

I understood. Something was wrong—terribly wrong. Maybe between him and my brother. But what was it?

What did they think of me? What were they not telling me?

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

The next few days passed quietly. He cared for me deeply, and I felt blessed, but I couldn't shake the heaviness of my heart.

You know that moment… when the whole world opposes you and advises you on things, yet you put everything on the line just to listen to your heart. Because you understand your heart, you know your courage, you're aware of your strengths, and you know that there will come a moment when you'll see it all back and feel, 'Yes, I did the right thing.'

That's how I felt when I saw him feeding me, taking care of me, doing all those small, intimate things I never imagined a husband would do for his wife.

It had been almost a week since the incident with Abhinandan. At that time, Rudra had signed the peace treaty with Mahabaleshgarh and gained the trust of other princely states. Talks were progressing fast.

The dates for Ranvijay and Aishwarya's wedding had also been fixed, after six months, as per the priest's suggestion. I was thrilled for Ranvijay, though I kept nudging him to at least see her portrait. He refused every time, saying: "The moment I said 'yes' to this marriage, she became my wife. What else do I need to see?"

I didn't know why, but I liked that answer.

Rudra and I had also decided that I would leave for Mahabaleshgarh the next day. An informer had told us that Abhinandan had just arrived there. I was excited and nervous. It had been so long. But somewhere deep in my heart, a worry kept blooming. Something wasn't right.

Like, there was something between these two men that I didn't know.

"Nandani,"

His voice startled me. I lowered my gaze from the stars above and saw him walking toward me.

"Is it finished?" I asked, referring to the meeting that had gone past midnight again.

"Yes," he said, wrapping his arms around me from behind. I rested the back of my head against his chest, finding calm in his warmth.

My lashes fluttered closed. "How did it go?" I asked.

He placed his chin gently on my head and intertwined our fingers. "Smooth. I'll have to visit a few states soon to check their progress,"

I smiled. "It's a good thing I'm going home for a few days. Otherwise, I would've been miserable without you,"

He chuckled. "I'll miss you everywhere, my love," he murmured, turning me to face him.

"Really?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Of course. You're my half—half soul, half breath, half everything. I'm not whole without you,"

I smiled. "The feelings are mutual, Ranaji,"

He furrowed his brows. “It sounds strange when you call me that in private. You do remember, you don’t have to, little wife,”

I blushed a little and laughed softly. “But I like calling you Ranaji when we’re alone. It makes my stomach flutter,”

He smiled and cupped my cheeks gently, bringing my face close to his. He brushed his lips softly against mine.

“Let’s have dinner, love,”

I nodded, and he held my hand as we both walked back into the bedroom.

The attendants had placed the food platter on the table for us, and the aroma of freshly cooked food filled the air, making my mouth water.

We both washed our hands and sat together on the couch to eat.

My gaze kept drifting to him; he looked incredibly handsome in the pure white kurta.

“Aap humein aise kyun dekh rahin hain?” (Why are you looking at me like that?) He asked with a teasing smile, and I looked down at my plate, cheeks flushing.

“You look sinfully…. delicious today,” I said timidly.

He chuckled, wrapping his arm around my waist, and pulled me closer. “Really?” he asked, and I nodded shyly.

I tore a bite of food and held it out to him. He held my wrist gently, his fingers brushing against my bangles, and leaned in to take the bite. His lips skimmed over my fingers ever so slightly, sending a soft shiver down my spine.

He looked into my eyes, chewing slowly, and I found myself blushing for no reason I could explain. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and suddenly, I remembered the night we spent together just a week ago, making my heart race at a relatively quick pace.

He leaned in toward me, pressing a warm kiss to the side of my neck.

I gasped softly and pulled away a little to look at him. A soft smile tugged at my lips. “I’m hungry,” I tried to say.

“So am I, little bird,” he said with a teasing smirk.

I tried focusing on the food, but couldn’t stop smiling like a fool.

We ate in silence, though our eyes constantly searched for each other, glances that lingered, looks that melted between bites.

Once we finished, I excused myself to wash my hands, and heard him rise too. Soon, he was beside me again. It was just so hard to keep the smile at bay.

“Why are you blushing so much?” He asked, drying his hands with a towel.

“What?” I tried to play it cool.

“You’re blushing a lot today,”

I shook my head nervously. “No, umm… I think Suman added something new to my bathing oil...”

He chuckled. “Oil? She added something to your bathing oil? Not water?

I stared at him dumbly, unsure how to respond.

Suddenly, he held my hand again. “Come here,” he said.

The bells of my anklets chimed as he guided me toward the bed. He kissed the back of my hand, pulling me closer, and I lowered my gaze, the memory of the night we spent together kept haunting me gently. And I knew our second time wouldn’t be the same as our first time.

He placed a finger under my chin, making me look up. “What happened?”

I shook my head, too shy to answer.

His other hand slid around my waist, drawing me in until we were almost touching.

My breath hitched, my fingers trembled, and I didn't know what I was feeling so.

He was the man I loved, my husband, so why did I feel so nervous and jittery?

He kissed me, a gentle, lingering touch, and pulled back with a smile. “You have a very dirty mind, I must say,” he whispered, locking my gaze with his.

I went stiff. Completely silent. My cheeks burned, and I turned my lashes south.

But then he cupped my face again, his thumb brushing my cheek. “And I love my dirty-minded little wife,” he added with a wink.

I let out a soft laugh.

“Are we... I mean... are we...?” I stammered, pointing nervously toward the bed.

But before I could finish, he gently ran his finger beneath my ear, and I felt like he was grazing my soul. My lashes fluttered shut, and I nearly lost my balance, feeling my entire body melt at his luscious torture.

He pulled back, and I opened my eyes, staring at him, startled. “How did you do that?”

He raised his brows. “What?”

I pointed to my neck. “This... feeling... it was so—”

“Sensational?” I nodded quickly. “Yes, exactly,”

His hand moved to my dupatta, slowly sliding it off my head. I exhaled slowly, calming my unevenly beating heart.

“Aap humein lene kab aayenge?” (When will you come to take me back?) I asked softly as he let the fabric slide off my shoulder.

He paused, meeting my gaze with a deep breath. ***“Abhi toh aap gayi bhi nahi hain, aur aapko wapas aana hai?”*** (You haven’t even left yet, and you already want to come back?) He teased, making me chuckle.

“Come,” he said, setting the dupatta aside on the bed.

He climbed into bed, resting his head on the pillows. I lifted my lehenga slightly and followed, lying beside him with my head against his chest, facing the ceiling.

He held my hand. ***“Hum aapko tab tak lene nahi aa sakte jab tak Abhinandan nahi chaahenge,”*** (I can’t come to bring you back until Abhinandan wants it.) he said, and I felt a knot form in my throat.

“Why?” I whispered.

His other hand touched my hair and cheek gently. “Because he’s your brother. He’s the prince and the next in line. He’s also my friend. I don’t want him to feel sidelined or less important in our lives,” he replied.

I turned to face him as he softly held the end of my braid.

“And I’m the Princess of Mahableshgarh and the Queen of Suryagarh, Rudra. Doesn’t my choice matter?” I asked, trying not to choke on my emotions.

He feathered my cheek with his fingers. “Of course it does, love. Your choice means everything to me. But I know the girl who gave up her wealth to rebuild a shelter won’t mind staying away from her husband for a little while, for the sake of her brother,”

I stared into his eyes. “Will he ever forgive me?”

He stroked my head, pulling me closer until I lay beside him, my head resting on his biceps. “He’s probably just as conflicted as you are. But instead of running from it, let’s face it together. He’ll understand, my love,”

I lowered my gaze, pressing my cheek against his chest. “I don’t know. I’m just afraid. That he’ll be angry. That he’ll hate me for marrying you when I knew he’d never approve,”

He kept stroking my head gently. “Don’t worry, little bird. Everything will be fine,”

“Hmm,” I mumbled, eyes growing heavy with sleep.

He kissed my forehead. “I’ll miss you so much,” he whispered.

I smiled a little, eyes still closed. “No, I don’t think you will,” I said softly.

“Why?” he asked, pulling the comforter up over both of us.

I opened my eyes and craned my head to look at him. “You don't need me for anything,” I said. “You've trained yourself to control your feelings all your life. You’ll do just fine without me. But think about me… Ever since my parents started talking about my marriage, I imagined a life where I wouldn’t spend even a single day away from you. And now, when that dream is breaking, it hurts,” I uttered softly, my voice almost trembling.

He pursed his mouth and pulled me closer, pressing his lips to the crook of my neck.

“Yes, I don’t need you for anything… except to stay alive,” he murmured.

I just stared at him blankly, my chest tight with emotion. I didn’t know why, but I felt so low in that moment, so fragile. The idea of leaving him, even for a little while, without knowing how long it would be, felt unbearable.

“Don't say things like that,” I whispered.

“Why?” he asked. “Are you afraid to hear the truth?”

I couldn’t answer. I just looked at him, eyes full of unspoken feelings.

"I love you so much, and I don’t think you truly understand what 'so much' means," I said, my voice barely audible.

Immediately, he hovered over me and cupped my cheeks, locking his eyes with mine.

“I do, Nandani. I know. I’m not leaving you, love. I want you to go home for a little while. It’s just a vacation,” he said gently.

“A vacation… right after our marriage, right after we…,” I hesitated, “…a week after we consummated our bond. And you won’t even tell me how long I’ll be gone,”

He smiled at me softly. “I’ll come to see you whenever you want me. I promise. Just send me a letter through someone you trust,”

“Promise?” I asked, finally managing a small smile.

He nodded. “Yes, my little baby,”

He leaned closer, kissing the side of my neck, sucking softly and slowly.

“Ahh, don’t mark me,” I said, almost giggling.

“Hnnn,” he hummed against my skin, continuing to kiss me.

I inhaled unevenly, shivering as his lips traced over me. “I just want to breathe you in,” he whispered.

That night, we stayed up talking, teasing, playing with each other’s fingers, lips, and laughter, until sleep gently stole us away.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

I woke up the next morning beside him and turned lazily to look at his sleeping face. He looked so peaceful. I couldn’t resist pecking his cheek. As I did, he stirred and took a deep breath, slowly opening his eyes.

“Good morning, love,” he murmured, drawing me even closer than I already was.

The comfort of our foreheads touching, of just being with him, filled me with a calm joy.

“Good morning, Ranaji,” I said softly.

He smiled, looking into my eyes. “You know how to seduce me best,” he said.

I blinked, confused. “What?”

“By behaving like a good wife, which you’re not,” he teased.

I burst into laughter and he kissed my cheek before whispering in my ear, “Laugh like this when you are there, bird, so they’ll know I keep you happy, not hurt,”

I narrowed my eyes. “So that’s the assignment?”

“Yes,” he smirked.

I threw off the comforter and stood up dramatically. “Alright! I’m the happiest person in the world!”

He chuckled. “Just don’t overact,”

I shot him a glare. “Trust me, I’m the best actor of this century. No one can tell if I’m acting or not,”

He laughed. “Yes, I remember the banana drama and how your parents left the dining area because of your ‘fantastic’ performance,”

I made a face and threw a pillow at him. “You’re the worst motivator!”

He laughed harder, pulling me close to him. “Aww, my little actress,”

I jerked his hand away and crossed my arms. “I want to go back home,”

I said, feigning anger, and he immediately sat up, turning serious.

“Yes, you should. You’re not the person I thought you’d be,”

“What?! How dare you!” I gasped in mock offence, stepping toward him.

“You’re just a spoiled, brainless, and stubborn princess,” he said, trying to suppress a grin.

“And what do you think you are?” I countered.

“Your husband,” he replied, and we both burst into laughter.

“You ruined the practice, Rudra!” I said, still laughing as I collapsed beside him.

“You’re glowing now,” he said, laughing his heart out.

Before our marriage, we had to hide our relationship, and pretending in front of others became our secret game. We would slip into acting anytime, just with a look. That’s how our bond grew, through secrecy, mischief, and love.

“I love you, Nandani,” he said suddenly, and my laughter died.

I cupped his cheek and kissed him gently. “I want you to make love to me… to your heart’s content… when I return,” I whispered near his ear.

His eyes darkened as he whispered back, “As you say, my queen,”

We spoke for a while longer, holding hands, before I finally rose from the bed.

“I have to get ready,” I said, tossing my braid behind me as I walked toward the bathing room.

But he grabbed my hand. “Let me have the pleasure, little dove,”

I giggled. “What?” I couldn't help but blush as I felt the heat rushing to my cheeks.

Before I could say anything more, he lifted me into his arms.

“Let me help you get ready,” he said, carrying me to the bathing room.

I laughed softly as he set me down. My eyes flickered toward the attendants, who were scattering flower petals into the bath.

“Privacy,” he ordered in a slow voice, and the attendants quietly left.

My heart fluttered as I looked at him. “Are you planning to… bathe with me?” I asked timidly.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled off his kurta, revealing his strong chest. “Yes,” he finally said.

My thoughts flashed back to that night, his body moving above mine, the way he made me feel completely undone, thrusting into me, making me moan senselessly.

“Come,” he said, snapping me out of the memory.

He stepped closer and turned me around, gently pushing my braid aside.

His fingers tugged at the strings of my blouse, one by one. I could feel my breath catching, and I inhaled deeply as the fabric loosened and slipped from my shoulders.

When his palm grazed my skin to push the blouse lower, I blushed profusely, my heart racing.

He pulled the blouse off and wrapped his arms around me from behind.

The warm air on my bare skin, the feel of his chest against my back, it all made me tremble with anticipation, turning me wet.

His big, wide hands raked against my waist from behind and reached toward the knot of my skirt. While he was untying the strings, his lips brushed against my temples, and my lashes fluttered with the feeling as he slowly pushed the skirt down, letting it pool at my feet.

I closed my eyes briefly, standing completely exposed to him.

“Rudra,” I breathed, and he hummed deeply. “Hnn-hnn,”

And it made a thousand butterflies flap their wings in my stomach, coaxing a timid smile from me.

He wrapped the bathing cloth around me, and I immediately held it against my front, turning toward him.

“Kya baat hai Ranaji, aaj apni patni par bada prem aa raha hai aapko,” (What's the matter, your Majesty, today you’re feeling a lot of love for your wife.) I asked, as he was undoing my braid.

“Apni patni ko prem jataane ke liye kisi kaaran ka hona aawashyak nahi, Ranisa,” (I don’t need a reason to show love to my wife now, do I, your Highness?) he retorted, and pushed my now open hair behind.

He guided me toward the pool, gently holding my wrist. Even though my heart raced with nervous excitement, I followed him quietly.

He stepped into the warm water first, and I slowly dipped my feet in, feeling it rise up to my knees. I moved to sit beside him as he sat down, but he surprised me by pulling me onto his lap.

I gasped at the sudden motion, the water rippling around us. He parted my legs slightly and pulled me closer, the shift making me feel exposed. My damp cloth slipped lower, revealing myself completely to him, and I just stared at him, my lips slightly parted.

Our chests touched, and I gave him a shy smile as his forehead rested against mine. His arms wrapped around me, melting into the comfort of his warmth and love.

Without a word, he began applying the fragrant bathing paste to my arms. I tried to protest, “You know you don’t have to—”

“Hnnn-hnnn,” he hummed, a sound that made a shiver run down my spine.

He pressed a soft kiss to my neck, and I gasped, the warmth of it curling heat through me. He looked at me, still rubbing the paste along my arms, his gaze deep

and steady.

His fingers slid slowly from my wrist up to my shoulder, his large hands easily cupping the length of my arm. When he reached my shoulder and added a bit more pressure, my lashes fluttered closed. And my body trembled under his touch.

Then his hands moved forward, to my neck. He cupped it gently, and a strong shiver shot through me, making my head fall back with a breathy moan.

My heart was pounding as he leaned in and kissed the corner of my lips. I closed my eyes again, breathing deeply to calm myself. When I opened them, I saw the small smile tugging at his lips, and I lowered my gaze, feeling timid.

“You’re spoiling me, you know,” I whispered.

His hands slid lower, rubbing across my skin, stopping just before my chest, he hummed, “Hnnn-hnnn,”

That throaty tone stirred my insides, erupting a huge wave of sensation that washed over me. And I knew—I knew he does that when he’s either speechlessly mesmerised or utterly aroused.

But suddenly, he withdrew his hand, depriving my breasts of his touch, and that made me feel oddly disappointed. So, without thinking, I gently took his wrists and guided his hands toward my neck.

He didn’t resist. His palms were rough and warm against my skin as they moved slowly down to my chest. And I shivered, blinking rapidly as he gently pressed my bosom. Then, suddenly, he pulled away.

He leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. “We shouldn't,” he said, voice low and heavy with restraint. “We should wait until you’re back,”

“Why?” I asked, almost too softly.

His eyes opened, and he looked at me, intense and honest. “Because I won’t be able to control myself next time, Nandani,”

My stomach twisted, and I could only manage a breathless, “Oh,”

He touched my chin and gently tilted my face toward him. “I don’t want to hurt you,”

Those words, so simple yet full of meaning, hit something deep inside me. I had heard them before, from my parents and others, but it felt like a vow when he said them. A promise that he would protect me, even from himself.

I felt there was something he wasn’t telling me, something that made him hesitate. I had tried before to get him to open up, but the words never came.

“I know,” I whispered, plastering a slight smile on my face.

Suddenly, he pulled me into his arms again. My hands braced against his biceps, and I looked at him, startled.

“I don’t like it when you go quiet like this,” he said.

“Quiet like what?” I asked.

“Like you're planning something for me,” he said, bringing our faces closer, our noses touching each other’s.

I smiled and shook my head. “Why would I? I’m not that clever,”

He pulled back a little, his brows furrowed. “What?”

I laughed lightly. “I just meant, I’m a terrible liar. If I were planning anything, you’d see it on my face,”

He smiled. “You’re my pure little wife. The best wife. The best woman in the world,”

I chuckled. “People should learn how to lie from you,”

He pulled me closer, hands raking down my back until our bare bodies were fully pressed together. “I’m not lying, little bird,”

Just as he leaned in to kiss below my ear, I placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back gently. “I’m getting late,”

He chuckled, and I slipped off his lap to finish bathing. After wrapping myself in a fresh cotton cloth, I stepped out of the pool, and he followed, his lower body draped in a white towel.

As I entered the dressing room, I noticed a beautiful red outfit paired with stunning jewellery. I blinked in surprise, turning to look at him.

“All this?”

He stepped closer. ***“Humne aapko muh dikhaai nahi di na abhi tak. To yeh joda aur zewar humaari oar se aapke ke liye ek chota sa upahaar,”*** (I haven't given you anything for your welcome gift. So this dress and jewellery are a small token of love from me.)

I looked at the set again. “It’s beautiful, but Rudra... you could’ve donated the money for the people's welfare. I already have enough dresses and jewellery,”

He walked up behind me and gently guided me toward the mirror.

I saw myself—hair wet and hanging past my hips, water droplets sliding down my shoulders, the translucent cloth clinging to me. My body looked fragile and glowing in the soft light.

He gently moved my hair aside, tilting my neck with the motion.

“This was bought from my own savings, Nandani. Everything I’ve saved in my life, this is where I wanted it to go,” he said.

And hearing him, tears welled up in my eyes without warning. His words struck something deep within me, and I turned numb. Unbidden, the fragments of his past began flashing through my mind, and silent tears slid down my cheeks as I managed to whisper, “What?”

I turned to look at him and saw him smiling softly. He leaned in and pressed a light kiss to my lips before saying, “Yes, I saved all that money to build a fortune for myself and my family. But after our wedding, I realised... my fortune, my destiny, my purpose, everything begins and ends with you. God knows what would’ve happened if your mother had married my father. I would’ve never found my Nandani. My little wife, who holds the power to tame me, control me, scare me... love me, and care for me,”

Tears streamed down more freely now, and I closed my eyes as he gently gathered me into a hug.

“Ab isme ashru bahaane jaisi to koi baat hi nahi thi, humaari dharmpatniji,” (There’s nothing in it to cry over, my little wife.) he teased gently, and I lifted my head with a smile.

“It's really beautiful. Thank you. I’ll treasure this till my last breath,” I said, and he chuckled.

“Now, I’m the King. I’ll surely get you many more clothes, my love,” he said proudly.

I shook my head with a small smile. ***“Wo sab to Ranaji ki bhent hogi, ye to humaare Rudra ka upahaar hai,”*** (All those will be gifts from the king, but this one is from my Rudra.)

His eyes lit up with that warmth again. He smiled and kissed my lips gently before saying, “Go try it on,”

I lowered my gaze and replied softly, ***“Aap laaye hain to aap hi pehna dijiye,”*** (You brought it... now you should help me wear it too.)

He smiled, a bit shyly this time. “Yes, sure,”

I turned my back on him and faced the mirror. With a breath of courage, I let the cotton cloth slip off my body, revealing my bare, damp skin in the sunlight streaming through the window. My heartbeat thudded in my ears, my body trembling at its boldness, but there was also comfort in this moment. With him, I felt safe.

I often wondered why clothes became such an inseparable part of life, when in love, they’re the first things to fall. Maybe it’s because we all hide our vulnerabilities, fears, and weaknesses, just like we hide our bodies in them. And to create life, God designed it so that we must shed those layers, as if to remind us that love must be honest and raw. We are our vulnerabilities, weaknesses, fears we hide from the world. And, by revealing our bodies to our beloved, we share all of this, so we’re not left alone in this world. So, there’ll be someone who’ll know the actual us.

To be truly known, to be truly loved, we must first be vulnerable. And not everyone is lucky enough to experience that. Some shred clothes for lust, not to see the soul, but to consume the body. But love... love needs no perfect skin, no glow. It seeks the trembling, the softness, the truth.

I saw him approach me, his gaze reverent and gentle. The sunlight danced on my skin, and I felt his presence behind me. He leaned in and took the skirt from my hand.

“Wait,” I managed to say, my throat running dry with the intense heat building between us.

I reached back, gathering my wet hair and twisting it into a bun. His gaze froze on me as I moved. Then, as I lifted my arms, he placed his hand gently on my

waist, palm resting softly on my stomach.

His touch didn’t spark tingles this time; it spread warmth. It was a touch of protection, of quiet love.

As I reached for a pin on the table to secure my bun, he kissed my shoulder tenderly.

Once done, I picked up the in-skirt. “This one is first,” I said, handing it to him.

He nodded, fumbling with it slightly. “Through my head,” I guided him, smiling.

He slipped it over my head and let it fall around my waist. His fingers worked at the strings, and I adjusted the hem.

“Here,” I said.

He tied the first knot gently. “Tighter, Ranaji,” I instructed, and watched his long fingers tug the strings more firmly.

His naked chest was pressed to my back, his chin lightly resting on my shoulder. My breath caught, and my skin turned sensitive, nipples erect with desire, feeling an immense hunger for his rough touch. I held still as he secured it.

I picked up the blouse next and handed it to him. He looked at it with mild surprise.

The blouse had three-fourths sleeves and a small neck, and it wasn't backless.

“Seems like someone doesn’t like my backless blouses,” I said with a smirk

He gave a soft laugh. “Definitely,”

I raised a brow. “Why?”

He slid my arms through the sleeves, helping me adjust it over my chest. “I don’t like everyone seeing my beautiful wife,” he murmured, tying the knots under the side of my arms.

“But I like the way I dress,” I said gently.

“I like it too. But… why backless?” he asked, as if a baby were complaining.

I lifted my arms slightly so he could finish tying it. “Because it makes me feel beautiful. Confident,” I admitted.

He leaned in and kissed my arm. “That’s wonderful. And for me, you're beautiful no matter what you wear—or don’t wear. One day, when you're gone, the world won’t remember how you dressed. But they will remember Queen Nandani, the woman who built shelters and saved lives,”

I smiled softly at his words. “Wow,” I giggled a little, feeling its warmth.

“Where were all these lessons when you left me?” I asked quietly.

His smile faded. A beat of silence passed before he answered. “Coated in a selfish reason…”

The pause was heavy. Then he continued, “...Not everyone is born evil, Nandani. Circumstances make them. Children aren’t born thieves; poverty turns them. People don’t come into the world as liars; insecurity breeds that. What we become... isn’t about gender, caste, religion, or upbringing. It’s about what life throws at us. Even the strongest empires fall when faced with the storm,”

I slowly turned to look at him, his words sitting heavily between us.

My eyes gazed into his, and I gently raised my palm to his cheek. I brushed my thumb across his lips and whispered, “I know, Rudra. I know. That’s why I love you so much. Because you weren’t born that way,”

He nodded softly. “Remember, no one is. When it comes to asking, keep your expectations small. But when it comes to giving, make your heart the biggest, my love,”

I nodded, tears forming without reason I could understand. I couldn’t stop myself from lifting up, trying to reach his lips.

But the final few centimetres of distance remained, and I murmured, breathless, “Kiss me, please,” My breathing deepened. “Make me smell like you… Please,” I whispered, and he slowly leaned in.

His lips captured mine, sucking them softly. He pulled me closer, cupping my neck with care. After a moment, he pulled away and gazed into my eyes. His fingers traced my cheek, and I felt like crying.

“Kis maya se mohit kar diya hai aapne humein, Rudra?” (What spell have you cast on me, Rudra?) I said, as a tear escaped.

He wiped it away, his own eyes shining. “I may have done the magic… but you're the witch,”

I burst into laughter, even as more tears fell. Turning away, I tried to catch my breath. “Come on, finish what you started, Ranaji,”

He grinned. “Wow… a new nickname—witch,” I smiled back.

He picked up the lehenga, slipping it over my head and letting it fall around my waist. The moment I saw myself, I gasped—amazed, shocked, glowing with happiness.

“It’s extravagant, Rudra,”

“The only one of its kind—made just for Ranisa,” he said, tightening the strings at my waist.

“It’s so heavy!” I said, trying to move into it.

“Is it?” he teased, and I nodded.

“Yes… and I wonder if you’ll still be able to lift me. I must have doubled in weight,”

And without warning, he swept me into his arms. I gasped, eyes wide. “Rudra!”

“Even if you doubled in weight, I’d still carry you,” he said, kissing my cheek.

“Now put me down,” I laughed breathlessly, and he gently did.

I caught my breath and looked at myself in the mirror again. The deep red made me glow.

He stepped closer and kissed the side of my head. “Let me dry your hair,” he said gently.

I smiled as he pulled the bun loose. My wet hair cascaded down to my hips, and he picked up the white cotton cloth and began to pat it dry.

“You need to part it and comb,” I instructed, and he nodded. I handed him the wide-toothed wooden comb. “In small sections. That way it won’t break,”

“Okay,” he said, so soft and attentive it melted me.

Watching him care for me like this felt surreal. If anyone had told me at our wedding that this same man would one day comb my hair with such tenderness, I would’ve laughed.

But now… now I saw how deeply he loved me. Still, a quiet voice inside wondered—was all this love and affection also born from guilt?

I watched him silently as he made small sections and dried my hair, occasionally using the ash pot for warmth and fragrance. It took time, but he was patient. After drying it all, he started combing with such care, his fingers dancing gently through the strands.

“You have really beautiful hair, little bird,” he said with a smile.

I looked at him in the mirror and smiled softly.

“You know, Nandani, I never saw your hair open before our wedding,”

“Really?” I asked.

He nodded with a hum, and when he finished combing, I said, “You have to braid it now, or it’ll get messed up during travel,”

“Alright,” he agreed and began parting it into three sections.

“You know how to braid?” I asked, amazed.

“Yes,” he said confidently.

“Wow. When did you learn that?”

“I have a little sister. She’s ten years younger than I. She didn’t have a mother, so I used to braid her hair every day,”

I frowned slightly. “She’s not your real sister, right?”

“Ah, no. But she’s more than that. She’s the daughter of my Guruji,”

I turned slightly to look at him. “Your Guruji has a daughter?”

He smiled. “Yes. Can’t he?”

I chuckled nervously. “Yes, yes, of course he can,”

He paused, then added quietly, “She’s adopted. Guruji found her by the river… someone had abandoned her,”

Something twisted in my stomach. I could barely imagine someone doing that to a child.

“Oh…” was all I could manage.

He finished the braid and smiled. “Time for the jewellery,”

He leaned over me from behind and reached for the necklace—a stunning piece of gold, studded with emerald. When he placed it against my neck, I gasped.

“It’s so beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it,”

He pushed my braid aside. “I managed to get it from another continent,” he said.

My eyes widened. “What? You have links with other continents?”

He fastened the choker and hummed through the mirror, “Hmm-hmm,”

I was still stunned as he picked up a set of bangles. Stepping in front of me, he extended his hand. I placed my wrist in his palm, and he gently slid the bangles on.

Tears filled my eyes again—too many emotions all at once.

He moved to my other hand and slid the red bangles on. Then, holding my hand delicately, he kissed the back of it and leaned close to my ear.

His voice dropped to a whisper, “You look so tempting... I want to take you so hard, you’ll scream my name at the top of your lungs,” It had my heart racing, and my eyes widened at the audacity of his words.

He brought his face back, and there was no trace of a joke in his expression. I looked at him, hopelessly enchanted, like a love-struck bee drawn to a dark, mysterious rose, thorny but blooming with intoxicating sweetness.

“When?” I whispered.

His thumb grazed my lower lip, and I felt a nervous shiver pass through me. My cheeks burned under the heat building inside.

“Soon,” he murmured, brushing his lips gently over mine.

I blinked at him, my core soaked, my thoughts slipping away as memories of our first time began to swirl in my mind, stirring a familiar ache deep within.

“How many days does your 'soon' have?” I asked softly.

He chuckled and turned to pick up the armlets. “Nandani,” he said, trying to move past the question.

“Rudra,” I called him again, my voice low as I touched his chin to bring his gaze back. “I’m asking when,”

The smile faded from his face. His eyes dipped slightly, a shadow of something heavy hidden beneath. He feathered his fingers over my skin, gently, almost hesitantly, then looked up.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, and I lowered my eyes. A tear rolled down my cheek. But I tried not to break.

“So, what have you two decided for me?” I asked quietly.

He stepped closer, but placed my hand on his chest. “Nandani,” he said, trying to soothe me.

I met his eyes. “What did you and the Prince of Mahabaleshgarh decide for me, Ranaji?” My voice wavered.

He shook his head. “Hey... don’t say it like that,”

“Then tell me, what am I supposed to do there?”

“Enjoy,” he said. “Spend time with your family,”

“And?” I asked.

He took a deep breath. “And be happy,”

I laughed bitterly, a tear escaping from my eyes. “Be happy,” I repeated, almost mockingly.

The silence that followed stretched heavily between us. Then it broke, and with it, so did I.

“You know what? Neither of you cares about my happiness, not even a little. You both think I’m a child who doesn’t know what she wants. You decided I shouldn’t marry the old King, he decided I shouldn’t marry you, and now you’ve both decided I should pretend nothing happened and go home. If either of you had truly cared, you wouldn’t have done what you did, or what you're still doing,” I exclaimed.

His jaw clenched. “So, what do you want?” he snapped. “Do you want me to declare war? To say, No, Abhinandan, I will not let your sister go. She is mine and she will stay with me?”

My nostrils flared. “No, Rudra. You could’ve just said it’s Nandani’s decision. Or maybe he could have come here if he wanted to meet me! Why does it always have to be me? Why do women always have to be the ones to make everything right?”

He grabbed my waist, pulling me close. “This isn’t about men or women, Nandani,” he said, voice low and full of heat. “I’m sacrificing too. I’m sending away my heart and soul with you. Why can’t you see that?”

Our eyes locked, flashing extreme anger, but more than that, longing. A deep, helpless yearning. I inhaled shakily, my heart pounding as we stood there, burning with everything unsaid.

And then... I looked at him, intentionally, into his eyes. My gaze softened, my lips quivered as they parted ever so slightly, and I let myself catch my breath. Slowly, I dropped my gaze to his lips, once, twice, then off to the side, pretending to resist, making sure he understood what I was yearning for. But the third time I looked into his eyes, he pulled me closer as he saw it. He knew.

“You little seductress,” he growled before crashing his lips to mine, clutching onto my nape.

A smile flickered on my lips as his urgency consumed me. The kiss turned desperate, tenderness swallowed by need. I melted into him, my entire body aching with desire.

“Take me now... I don’t want to wait,” I whispered between our kisses.

He paused, warning in his eyes. “It’ll hurt,”

But I pushed him gently back into the chair, breathless and bold. “Nothing will hurt more than being away from you,” I said, voice shaking. Things shifted quickly from pure emotions to lust for each other.

He looked at me, stunned by my determination as I skimmed his lower cotton cloth away. My sight fell on his strong bulge, and I gulped, lifting my gaze from there to his eyes to see if there was any sign of offence. But he spat in his hand, lubing himself to make it easy for me. My heartbeat quickened as I slowly pulled my skirt up and walked toward him.

“Are you sure, little bird?”

I nodded. “I want to remember this. I want to feel like yours. Even if just for now,”

“Yes, I want to feel you for a week, or at least until you come back and make me feel you again,” I said boldly.

He smirked slightly, his hand slipping around my waist to guide me to him. “Careful what you ask for, little wife,” he said, while I settled myself on his thighs, parting my legs.

My feet barely touched the ground as I straddled him, his warmth surrounding me. His touch was reverent, his eyes searching mine again. “It’ll still hurt,”

Inhaled deeply, touching his face. “This pain... I can take it. Because it’s from you,”

He cupped my cheek and leaned in. “And what if I can’t control myself this time?”

His words made my insides churn. Drawing a deep breath, I moved over his shaft, stroking it with my motions.

“Then don’t. Just do me as you like,” I whispered.

His lips met mine again, firmly pulling my hips against his. And I gasped in his mouth as I felt his shaft touching my core. I held it, trying to push myself against it. He held my hips, hoisting me up slightly, and made me move against him, which made him enter me.

My head inclined back as I felt a sharp, rough pain shoot through my body.

“Aaahhhhhh,” a cry slipped off my lips. He bounced me up and down, pushing my limits, and tears filled my eyes.

My mouth parted, brows knitted together, and lashes fluttered senselessly as delicious torment waved throughout my body.

He looked into my tearful eyes and smirked lightly. “Awww, my strong bird,”

He held my wrist and moved my palm from his shaft to his shoulder to wound my arms around him.

I lost all my strength. And the moment I wrapped my hands around his shoulder, he grabbed my waist firmly and rested his back against the backrest.

And I went crazy when he began grinding under me, locking his gaze with mine, catching onto the rhythm. My mouth hung open as the sensations had me shivering with his every move.

With each slam, it felt like he was pushing my limits, farther and farther. I felt him tearing me apart in countless ways, yet his need was endless.

“Aaahhhh, Rudra,” I whimpered, my head falling back helplessly. He crushed me against him, driving into the deepest, most sensitive parts of me, touching my soul, sending wild shivers across my body.

“Hnnn-hnnn,” he groaned low in his throat, grinding his hips slowly at first, his movements both tender and demanding.

His pace was cautious, slow, holding back, watching me. But when my whimpers melted into soft, needy moans, his rhythm shifted, growing stronger, deeper. And with every movement, pleasure began to build fiercely within me.

“Aaahhhhhhh,” My moans turned breathless. Without warning, he lifted me up and set me atop the dressing table, my heart pounding against my ribs.

The cold touch of the mirror behind me sent a shiver racing up my spine. I looked at him, breathless, as my hands slipped down from his shoulders. His gaze locked with mine, burning with hunger, and he parted my legs wider, pushing himself into me again.

My head rolled back, my hair brushing the glass.

“Aaahh…” A broken cry escaped as he started moving, slow, deliberate strokes that soon found a faster, more desperate rhythm, making me lose my sanity.

The room filled with the sound of our mingling breaths, the tinkling of my bangles and anklets echoing in the small space. His arms circled my waist, pulling me closer as if he could not bear any distance between us.

His urgency, his overwhelming need, mirrored mine. His hand pressed against the mirror behind me strongly for balance as he moved faster and rougher, making the entire table tremble beneath us.

“Hnnnnngh,” he groaned, deep and raw against my ear, making me lose myself entirely. My legs felt weak, my body strained toward him, every nerve ending alive with sensation. The table shook with each thrust, and I teetered on the edge of my release, gasping for air, drowning in the waves he sent through me.

Hearing my cries, he attempted to slow down, but my body demanded otherwise as my lips shamelessly demanded, “Faster, Rudra,”

I whimpered, shameless, desperate.

He pulled back to look at me, and the fire in his eyes almost made me cry out again. Moving his hand from the mirror to my neck, he cupped it gently, making me surrender completely. His pace quickened with a fierce intensity, making me lose all my senses.

“Aaaahhhhh..” My cries grew louder, wilder, the pressure inside me building tighter. Sweat glistened on our skin, and I couldn’t feel my knees.

And it happened, the knot inside me broke free. My body shuddered around him, and I clung to his shoulders, gasping against his skin.

Feeling my release, he slowed, letting me breathe, letting me find my way back. I collapsed forward, resting my forehead on his shoulder, panting heavily.

Still holding me close, Rudra lifted me into his arms. My hands curled around his neck as he carried me out of the dressing room. Every step he took sent tremors through my oversensitised body.

He pushed open the door to the bedroom, and I leaned in, seeking his mouth, wanting to touch him. Our lips met in a frantic, messy kiss of pure and aching need.

“I want you to remember,” he said between kisses, “that I love you... so damn much,”

“I know,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

He kissed me again, harder this time. “I’m telling you again, little bird, so you won’t ever doubt it,”

He dropped me softly onto the bed, and I lay back, breathless, my heart hammering in my chest as he climbed onto the mattress, his strong form looming over me.

I watched, half-dazed, as he undid the curtains around the bed, enclosing us in layers of soft fabric, our secret world, hidden from everything else.

My breath caught as he grabbed my thighs, pulling me closer to him. He knelt between my legs, and his fingers moved to the strings of my lehenga.

“Careful... it's precious to me,” I whispered, signaling how roughly he was pulling at the strings of my lehenga, as if he might rip them apart.

His hands paused for a moment before he tugged the skirt down, setting it aside with surprising tenderness. His fingers then found the strings of my in-skirt, and soon, that too slipped from my legs.

Grabbing my thighs, he pulled me closer, capturing both of my legs together against his chest. My heart thundered wildly, and my cheeks burned when my feet brushed against the side of his cheek, making my breath hitch, and my eyes widened.

He pushed into me again, and my head fell back instantly.

“Aaahhhhh….” I moaned, struggling to muffle my sounds. My hands fisted the bedsheet tightly as he began thrusting into me, slow but purposeful.

The soft clinking of my anklets and bangles filled the air, the music of our union echoing around us.

My body instinctively moved with his, pleasure rising and twining with a faint edge of pain. It was overwhelming, raw, and impossibly beautiful.

I tried to quiet my moans by pressing my hand over my mouth, but he caught my wrist and made me look at him.

I was trembling, moving helplessly against him, feeling my strength slowly drain. He intertwined our fingers, caging me, possessing me. His every thrust was slow torture, a beautiful, burning ache.

I cried out, turning my face to the side, biting my lower lip in a futile attempt to stay silent.

Then, suddenly, he released my hands and turned me onto my side. His palm anchored my thigh, the other steadying my waist as he entered me again, and I almost broke.

The angle heightened the friction, the intensity, and within moments, I was spiralling toward release again.

His hand moved from my waist to the strings of my blouse, tugging at them urgently.

When he struggled to untie the stubborn knot, he gritted in frustration, and I gasped out, “No, ahhhh—don’t you dare tear it! Pleaseeee,” my voice pleaded between moans.

He growled softly, but obeyed, slowing down enough to pull the strings free without tearing the fabric.

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to calm my racing heart, but he was relentless.

In one swift motion, he flipped me onto my stomach and lifted my hips, positioning me on all fours. His hands gripped my waist as he adjusted himself, and when he pushed in again, a loud, broken moan ripped from my throat.

“Aaahhh…. Rudraaaa!” My fingers clawed at the bedsheet.

“Yes, little wife,” he said in a voice thick with desire. He thrust into me slowly, his hands tight on my hips, savouring every inch of me.

“You’re so damn hot like this,” he murmured, and I whimpered in response, “Aaaahh... reallyy…”

His hands roamed up my back, finding the clasp of my blouse at the nape of my neck. With steady fingers, he undid it, letting it fall open.

I felt small under him, completely taken. And I buried my face into the mattress, muffling my cries, as his fingers unbraided my hair while thrusting into me, letting it tumble free over my back and shoulders.

“Aaaaahhhhh…” I moaned, the sensations overwhelming.

“Yes, little bird,” he growled, pulling me back, so I was sitting in his lap, my back pressed against his chest, facing away from him.

I gasped, trembling violently, as I pushed the blouse off my shoulders, baring myself completely to him.

His hand cupped my neck from behind, guiding my head to the side so he could press his lips to the tender spot just below my ear while moving in me.

“Aahhhhhh…” I shuddered under his touch as his other hand cupped my bosom.

“Want to try something new, bird?” he whispered, his voice deep and husky.

A fierce tremor ran through me. I could barely form words. “Nehhhhwwww?” I breathed out, my head falling back onto his shoulder.

His hand squeezed my breast gently, sending more shivers down my spine.

“Yesssss,” he uttered against my ear, his breath hot. “Are you ready, Nandani?”

Hearing my name from his mouth in that sensual tone shattered whatever control I had left. I nodded shakily. “Yehsss…”

He chuckled lowly, sucking the rim of my ear. “Are you sure?” he teased, his lips brushing my skin.

“Yes, Ranaji,” I whispered, utterly undone.

His hand cradled my cheek, tilting my face to meet his burning gaze. I stared at him, my lashes wet, lips trembling, hair messed wildly over me.

His eyes were heavy with emotion, with possession.

Then he inched closer and captured my lips in a deep, slow kiss as he guided me forward onto all fours again.

“Aahhh,” a soft moan escaped me as he positioned himself above me the same way.

I gasped as the new angle made every sensation sharper, more intense.

I buried my face into the mattress, crying out uncontrollably as he thrust into me, his weight pressing me down.

“Aaaaahhhhh…” My moans grew louder, desperate. The pleasure was dizzying, blinding, and I shattered again, releasing.

“Very good,” he murmured against my ear, his voice a low growl.

His weight pinned me beneath him, his hands firm on my arms, and I could barely move, barely think.

“Aahhh…. Rudraaaaa!” I sobbed out, drowning in the pleasure and need.

He whispered sweet, dirty things into my ear that made me even wetter.

“Aaaahhh, yes, bird,” he coaxed, moving against me with a powerful, steady rhythm.

Tears pricked at my eyes from the overwhelming sensations, from the completeness of it all.

His hands slid down my thighs, and he pulled my leg higher, parting them, adjusting me so he could sink even deeper.

I gasped, fisting the bedsheets so tightly that my knuckles ached, feeling torn between discomfort and unbearable pleasure.

“Aahhhhhh…” I cried out again.

“How does this feel, love?” he whispered into my ear, his voice a sinful caress.

“Like... I belong to you... and you belong to me,” The words stumbled out, trembling, my breathing shaky and ragged.

“Tell me whenever you feel you can't take more,” he murmured, and I nodded quickly, biting my lip.

“Yesssss... Aaahhhhhhhhhh!” He thrust faster, harder, and just when I felt myself tipping over the edge again, he suddenly pulled away.

My eyes flew open, shocked.

“Are you mad?!” I yelled at him, breathless and furious.

He only smirked, that wicked glint in his eyes. “Earn it, love,” he said, lying back against the pillows with an infuriatingly calm expression.

I stared at him, stunned for a moment, and slowly, I bit my lower lip.

I inhaled a deep breath, straightened myself, and threw my hair back. Climbing over him, I widened my legs to sit on his lower abdomen.

I sank onto him, taking it inside me, pressing my hands against his chest to balance myself.

“Ahhhhhhh,” I gasped, trembling as friction, pain, and pleasure mixed within me.

He held my waist, helping me move against him. “You are beautiful, Nandani,” he said, and I straightened my back, feeling my hair cascade behind me.

My hands slid over his thighs and stomach, keeping myself steady as I shamelessly rode him, chasing that burning high building inside me. When the wave finally crashed, I shook senseless and collapsed, panting hard against his chest.

“Ahhhhh…” I moaned.

Suddenly, he turned me under him. “Ahh, please… let me breathe for a moment,” I begged, my chest heaving.

He pressed a loving kiss to my cheek and stilled, letting me catch my breath. I could feel my legs trembling, my knees weak.

“We can stop if you're tired,” he whispered.

I looked into his eyes, shaking my head. “I want to get sick for a week,” I said breathlessly, and he chuckled darkly at my words.

“Ohh, as you wish, my Ranisa,” he teased.

“Yesss, do it, Ranaji,” I smiled, and he kissed me deeply, slowly pushing into me again.

A shaky moan broke from my lips as I was swallowed by his kiss. His hand fisted my hair, angling my head so my chin brushed his shoulder. My legs clung weakly to his sides, and I had my arms wrapped around his back.

I felt a tear collect at the corner of my eye as he pushed himself completely into me for the first time. My whole body quivered; my lower abdomen ached, and he groaned in my ear.

He began moving slowly inside me, deep and thorough, making me whimper, nails dragging down his back uncontrollably. My hands fumbled lower, but couldn't reach the curve of his hips.

Every thrust sent shockwaves through my body, emptying my thoughts, drowning me in pure sensation.

His lips trailed over my ear, my jaw, my flushed cheek. I was a mess. Completely lost.

I had no idea how many thrusts, how many releases, how many waves of pleasure had broken over me by now. Time had stopped.

My breath shook, my body trembled violently under him, my legs shivering, until my senses faded away. My throat ran dry from moaning and crying for so long.

It felt like he was claiming every inch of me—every pore, every secret place. It was beyond anything I could ever put into words.

He lifted his face to meet my eyes, and I looked up at his dishevelled hair falling over his forehead. His lips looked chapped, and his cheeks flushed.

He looked the same: flushed, breathless, and feral, hair falling into his eyes.

He kissed me fiercely, dangerously, as his thrusts deepened, and I moaned into his mouth, tears spilling down my cheeks.

“Take it like the strong queen you are, Nandani,” he whispered, sending another fierce shiver down my spine.

He groaned, slamming into me even harder as I bit into his shoulder without thinking, desperate for some anchor.

I cried out, my hands moving blindly until he grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head. His forehead pressed against mine, and our shaky breaths tangled together. His movements turned frantic, deeper, harder.

My bangles snapped, broken pieces falling onto the bed, but he didn’t slow.

Tears ran freely down my cheeks now.

And he groaned wildly, pushing himself even further, driving me beyond the edge, and I shook violently underneath him, my eyes shut, feeling the pain.

I moaned helplessly.

And finally, I felt him release, spilling his warmth deep within me, continuing to move with slow, heavy thrusts until he gave me every last drop.

Panting, he collapsed, lying heavily over me, and buried his face against my cheek; his grip on my wrists slowly loosened.

I couldn’t move, yet my body trembled violently as I tried to straighten my legs, and a slow whimper escaped my lips.

He hushed me gently, slowly pulling out before rolling to the side. He lay on his stomach beside me, closing his eyes in exhaustion, his face sweaty.

Blinking through the haze, I looked at him, feeling completely and utterly ruined but also beautiful and complete.

I watched him inhale a few deep breaths, and my brows furrowed as he drifted into sleep almost instantly.

“Rudra,” I called softly, but he didn’t respond.

Smiling to myself, I straightened a little and immediately winced from the shivering pain shooting through my legs and body.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, trying to calm myself down.

I turned, resting my face against his bare back, and snaked my arm around his waist. Pulling the comforter up, I covered us both, not realising when I too slipped into sleep.

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I woke up feeling a heavy weight across my body. Through dizzy eyes, I noticed his arm was wrapped tightly around me, holding me close.

My back pressed against his chest, and his warmth surrounded me.

I inhaled a slow, deep breath and tried to turn around to look at him.

But the moment I moved, a searing pain shot through my entire body, my knees, my ribs, my lower abdomen, and even my arms ached unbearably.

I whimpered, turning my head carefully to glance at him. His eyes were still closed. I reached out and touched his hand gently.

We were still naked, and even in his sleep, he leaned closer and pressed a tender kiss against my forehead.

“Rudra,” I called in a low voice, and he stirred, inhaling a deep breath.

He rolled onto his back, covering his eyes with one arm, and hummed a sleepy sound.

I smiled at his cuteness and shifted carefully, resting my head on his chest.

“Uth jaaiye, bahut samay ho gaya hai,” (Wake up, it's getting too late now.) I said, nudging him gently.

He cracked open his eyes, heavy with sleep, and mumbled, “For what?”

“You don't remember? I have to leave for my home,” I reminded him.

He wrapped his arm lazily around me and murmured, “No... don't go. We'll go together tomorrow,”

I frowned. “What?” I tried to sit up, but pain flared again through my body.

He inhaled deeply, half-asleep, and nodded. “Yes,”

I smiled, watching him drowsily agreeing, and pulled the comforter tighter around me. As I shifted, it slid off him, leaving him completely naked.

“Cover yourself,” I said, chuckling. But he was too deep in sleep to respond.

Carefully, I moved to step down from the bed. The moment my feet touched the floor, my legs buckled slightly under me, trembling and weak. A burning soreness throbbed through my core, and I gritted my teeth to keep from crying out.

I steadied myself and limped toward the washroom, glancing out the window—it was already dark.

“Rudra, uth jaaiye, raatri ho gayi hai,” (Rudra, get up, it's getting dark.) I called out.

From behind, his voice came, loud and insistent, ***“Nandaniiiiii, lautkar aaiye idhar!”*** (Nandaniiii, come back here!)

I laughed, replying, “I got to pee!”

He grunted back, “Okay.”

I entered the bathing room, finished quickly, and took a fast bath, tying my hair into a tight bun despite the aching in my body.

Once done, I dressed in my nightgown, every movement reminded me of the bruising soreness he'd left behind.

Returning to the bedroom, I saw him still sprawled on his stomach, the covers barely clinging to his waist.

Smiling to myself, I pulled the comforter over him properly, when the sudden, loud knock startled me.

I called out, “Who is it?”

“Bhabhisa, it's Ranvijay,” came the nervous reply.

I quickly grabbed my dupatta and covered my head before walking to the door. Opening it, I found Ranvijay standing there, looking pale and anxious.

“What happened?” I asked, frowning.

“Bhaisa…” he choked out. He looked so disturbed that I immediately stepped aside.

“There,” I said, gesturing him in.

He rushed to the bed and called out urgently, “Bhaisa!”

Rudra's eyes flew open.

Seeing Ranvijay's face, he straightened up instantly. “Ranvijay,” he said sharply. “What happened?”

Ranvijay took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. “We're under attack. Surgami Dev Singh and Maasimaa are missing... I think something is terribly wrong,”

Without missing a beat, Rudra ordered, “Alert the army. I'm coming.”

Ranvijay nodded and hurried out.

Rudra swung off the bed and rushed toward the dressing room to change. When he returned, I was still standing there, my brows knitted in worry.

“Hey,” he said softly, pulling me into a tight embrace. “Everything will be fine,” he promised, pressing a hurried kiss to my forehead.

Looking into my eyes, he added, “You should rest, love,” He pecked my lips briefly. “I'll be back,” he said, and I nodded wordlessly as I watched him leave.

Still stunned, I sat down on the bed, trying to process everything.

Immediately, I rose to my feet and ran out, ordering Suman to take the ladies to the safest quarters inside the palace, and closed my chamber door.

Night had fallen completely, and as I stared out of the window, distant sounds of clashing swords faintly reached my ears.

But I couldn’t make sense of it. Why would Surgami Dev Singh attack like this? It was clearly a one-sided war; he had to know he couldn't win.

Why?

I paced the room slowly, the pain in my back sharp with every step. Only one explanation made my body shiver: a setup, an illusion.

But what was it?

And then I remembered—Surgami Dev Singh had left Mahableshgarh the night before my wedding, and Rudra had returned late in the evening, just before the ceremony.

Also, Rudra fought overnight with the army, which meant he was here a night before our wedding, right after he talked to me. He had the fastest horse, so he could arrive on time even while riding through the uneven path and hilly ways.

But how could Surgami Dev Singh leave in the middle of the night and still reach here to face Rudra?

Suddenly, a terrifying thought struck me, making my blood run cold. 'What the hell…?'

My body shook violently with the realisation creeping into my mind. I couldn't believe it.

"Suman! Reva! Is anybody there?" I called out desperately, my voice cracking.

Panic surged through me. I looked around, searching for something sharp, anything for defence.

Rushing to the dressing table, I yanked open the drawers with trembling hands.

He'd be here any moment.

And suddenly, the door to my chamber burst open with a loud crash—and I screamed in fright.

My sight fell on Surgami Dev Singh and a group of soldiers. I stumbled back, frantically looking around for anything I could use to defend myself.

Where would he have hidden something?

My body was shivering, but I forced myself to think.

"Stay away from me," I roared as the soldiers stepped inside my chamber, moving towards me.

"Do not worry, my queen," the old king sneered. "They won't harm you. But I will,"

At that moment, my eyes landed on the table near the couch.

Yes! That's where Rudra usually sat, where he would've kept a knife ready for emergencies.

The soldiers lunged toward me, but I sprinted to the couch, bending low and frantically feeling beneath the table.

Please, please, please… I chanted in my mind.

My fingers brushed against something hard and cold. Without wasting a second, I pulled out the knife.

The nearest soldier reached for me, trying to hold my arm, but I plunged the blade into his throat.

Hot blood sprayed over my nightgown as he collapsed onto the floor.

"Bastard," I hissed under my breath, my heart thundering.

The other soldiers hesitated, momentarily stunned. I tightened my grip on the knife, my jaw clenched.

"What are you looking at? She's just a girl," Surgami Dev Singh mocked.

I let out a cold chuckle. "Yes," I said, my voice steady. "I'm just a girl,"

I inhaled deeply, tightening my hold on the dagger, and moved toward them. Their swords gleamed under the dim light, and though they heavily outnumbered me, almost fifty against one, I could see it in their eyes: they weren't here to kill. They wanted to kidnap me.

Suddenly, Suman slipped into the chamber. Her horrified gaze met mine. I shook my head sharply, signalling her to stay quiet and leave. She understood and quickly disappeared.

As five soldiers charged at me, fear gripped me, but I stood firm with my defence ready.

The clash of steel echoed through the chamber as my dagger met their swords. They were distracted, their eyes flickering to my dishevelled hair and nightgown. I used that to my advantage, and when they faltered, I struck.

One soldier howled in pain as I buried the knife into his heart. He collapsed instantly.

Another soldier swung at me, and I parried with my knife, but his strength pushed me backwards.

I was losing ground, the edge of his sword dangerously close to my throat. Sweat trickled down my forehead, and my knees trembled. I was slipping, losing my strength.

But then I spotted a knife tucked into his belt.

With a desperate surge of energy, I grabbed it, twisted it upward, and slashed his neck. He fell to the ground, his blood splattering my face and neck.

Panting heavily, now armed with two knives, I turned to face the others, ready for more.

But then a man stepped forward. He was over seven feet tall, reeking of filth, with teeth so rotten it seemed he'd never bathed or brushed in his life.

“Take her,” Surgami Dev Singh ordered.

The monstrous man lunged and grabbed my hair in his massive fist. And I screamed as pain ripped through my scalp.

“Leave me!” I shrieked, trying to stab him, but he caught my wrists in a vice-like grip. My bangles shattered, shards slicing into my skin.

Tears blurred my vision, and with my free hand, I managed to stab near his waist. He let out an animalistic growl but tightened his grip even more, lifting me onto my toes by my hair.

“Leave me,” I screamed desperately. “I will kill you, bastard!” But they only laughed.

“This way, Rakhtbhook. Quick!” Surgami Dev Singh barked.

The giant, literally, dragged me by my hair through the hallway. As he made his way out of the bedchamber, I looked at the bodies of fallen soldiers littering the corridor.

And we did stop before the ninth chamber. A heavy iron door loomed ahead. Twenty soldiers struggled to push it open.

“You know,” Surgami Dev Singh sneered, “each one of you will be dead before sunrise,”

They shoved me inside as the massive iron door creaked shut behind us. That bastard’s grip on my hair was firm, and I screamed throughout the path.

Total darkness swallowed me whole when I heard a sound—a relatively smaller door opening. The soldiers carried fire torches and walked forward.

It was humid, foul-smelling, and deathly silent except for our footsteps echoing down a narrow underground passage.

My bare feet ached, scraping against the jagged stones. After what felt like forever, the passage opened into a dense, black forest.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I was terrified. I didn't know where they brought me.

“Where the hell are you taking me?” I cried out.

“I will kill you!” Surgami Dev Singh chuckled darkly.

“I think your mind is too old to understand the consequences of killing me,” I spat back at him. The giant yanked my hair harder, and a scream tore from my lips.

“Leave my hair! He will kill you!” I warned him again, but they all laughed cruelly.

“You would not be alive to see that,” Surgami Dev Singh's eyes gleamed with madness.

“Why are you doing this?” I gritted, earning a sinister snicker from him.

“You took me for a fool and used me,” he said. “He betrayed me for the throne. I will take you from him,” he spoke like a lunatic.

“Can you even hear yourself?” I snapped.

Suddenly, the giant man struck me with a powerful slap across my cheek.

Pain exploded across my face, and tears filled my eyes.

They laughed as he hoisted me over his shoulder like a sack.

“Leave me!” I shouted, pounding my fists against his back, but it was useless.

They carried me deeper into the dark woods. I tried to memorise landmarks, anything, but there was only endless darkness and towering trees.

Closing my eyes, I prayed to the mighty gods for protection.

Please, I whispered silently, save me from these monsters.

Suddenly, my eyes snapped open, and my sight fell on a dark shadow hiding behind the trees. As the figure peeked out from the darkness, I recognised her.

It was Suman.

She had been following us.

I smartly showed her my palm, signalling her not to follow any further, but to go back to the cave and get help. She understood and left silently, while the men continued dragging me deeper into an isolated, unfamiliar place.

Once they reached, they threw me down roughly. I pushed my hair back from my face and chuckled, looking at them, all of them eyeing me like I was prey.

“Now, let's see how long your dear husband can protect you,” Surgami Dev Singh said with a wicked smirk. “We just have to wait till the first spark of

morning,”

I didn’t know why, but his words made me laugh until my stomach ached.

“Such fools,” I said, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes. “If you want to kill me, kill me now. Because once he arrives, you won't even have time to take your last breath,”

His smile faltered slightly.

Suddenly, the tall brute stepped forward and landed another hard slap across my cheek. My face burned, but I only glared back, my anger rising.

Then I laughed again. Harder.

Their confusion grew. I inhaled sharply and closed my eyes, feeling his presence drawing near.

I couldn’t save them if they were so desperate to die.

I smiled, peeking up at the dark sky. He was close.

“One,” I whispered. “Two,” I breathed. “Three,” I roared, opening my eyes wide just as the sound of galloping horses filled the air, growing louder by the second.

“Take your positions!” Surgami Dev Singh shouted. The soldiers scrambled, drawing swords and surrounding me.

The tall man, seething, grabbed a blade and pressed it against my throat. “So you want to be the first to die, huh?” I taunted him coldly. I felt so bad for the poor man and the utterly oblivious soldiers, relying and working for this old skunk with a nose for nonsense.

The horses' thundering hooves shook the ground, and soon, shafts of light pierced through the trees. And there he was—my Rudra, with a sword in hand, bloodstained clothes and jaw, eyes burning with rage. Beside him, my brother Abhinandan, Ranvijay, Agastya, and a battalion of our soldiers.

As soon as they dismounted, Rudra's eyes found mine across the field, locking onto me with a fierce, possessive intensity.

He tilted his head slightly and smirked. “Comfortable, little bird?” he called.

I managed a faint smile. “Clearly not,” I replied dryly.

He chuckled lowly, but didn’t move. His gaze shifted around, analysing the situation, especially the blade so dangerously close to my neck.

“It's good too,” he said casually, causing everyone's eyes to snap toward him.

Abhinandan grabbed Rudra's collar in anger. “Are you stupid? They'll kill her!” he yelled.

Rudra didn't even flinch. He just looked back at him and said, “Then let them,”

Shock swept through everyone, but a slight smile appeared on my face.

“What the hell?!” Abhinandan shouted.

“You know what? She’s just trouble,” Rudra said coldly.

I gritted my teeth. “What? What did you just say?” I snapped.

His intense gaze pinned me down. “Yes. Trouble,” he repeated. “Whatever they’re doing is good. She played with the old king to get back at me. God knows

if she is playing now or not. She is adept at killing them all. She is just faking it,"

My brother and his brothers frowned at his behaviour. "What are you saying, Bhaisa?" Agastya asked, baffled.

Anger flared inside me like wildfire. "Ohhh, so you think this filthy man holding a blade to my throat is with my consent? And this whole setup here is fake?" I said. "God! I did everything for you, and you dare show your true colours now, you bastard!"

Rudra stepped forward, not backing down. "I am showing my true colours? Me? You're the one who showed her true colours," he shot back.

I turned to Surgami Dev Singh, furious. "You know what? Kill me. Tell this brain-dead blockhead to move the blade already," I said fearlessly.

Panic rippled through the others. "NOOO!" Ranvijay, Agastya, and Abhinandan screamed.

"What in the name of saving are you doing, Bhaisa?" Ranvijay shouted. Agastya looked visibly staggered, and Abhinandan seemed all set to murder him first.

"You know what? Let me kill you first," he said, lifting his sword.

"NOOOOO!!! Kill me first. This man disgusts me. I cannot believe I wished to marry him," I hollered. I could sense that this irate verbal exchange left everyone utterly confused.

"Yes, kill her," Rudra said.

"Nooo," everyone screamed.

"Yes, kill me!" I insisted, looking straight into Rudra's eyes.

"Yes, kill her," Rudra said again, a sharp, dangerous glint in his eyes.

I clenched my fists and stared at him. "Yessss, kill me!" The corner of his lips curved up ever so slightly, and he slipped his hand to his waistband, pulling something small and sharp.

Our eyes locked, speaking without words. He moved fast, flicking his wrist, and I caught the glint of a sharp pin sailing through the air toward me.

I closed my eyes instinctively. "Aaaaaaahhhhhh!" the tall man howled in agony.

He dropped the knife from my throat, clutching his side. Without missing a beat, I snatched the fallen blade and stabbed it into his waist.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!" he screamed even louder, staggering back. Blood poured out as he collapsed.

Chaos erupted, swords clashed, sparks flew, and the soldiers fought fiercely.

Through it all, Rudra fought his way to me.

When he reached me, I couldn't stop myself and slapped him hard across the cheek.

He blinked at me in shock. "If your aim had missed, Rudra…" I said, my voice shaking. "If you had missed…"

He chuckled and pulled me gently into his arms. "How could I?" he whispered. "Not possible, my love,"

He said, and I felt his palm gently caressing my head, sliding from the crown down to the back. As his fingers met the tangled mess of my hair, he broke the hug, his brows tightening with concern.

He swallowed hard, and I could feel his heart beating rapidly. Carefully, he tucked a loose strand behind my ear, his touch trembling with anger as he struggled to hide.

I lowered my gaze, glancing around at the chaos, but his gentle touch under my chin brought my eyes back to him.

He tilted my face sideways, inspecting the mark on my cheek. A heavy breath escaped his chest, and I could feel his fury rising. His fingers feathered softly over the bruise, and I closed my eyes at the tender touch.

The tall man was still screaming. Rudra gently moved me aside, handing me his sword. “Hold this for me,” he said.

I took it, instantly feeling its staggering weight, heavier than anything I'd ever lifted.

I watched as Rudra turned and strode toward the tall man whose hand still bled from the sharp pin.

Without hesitation, Rudra punched him square in the face, sending him stumbling back. The man tried to fight back, throwing his fist toward Rudra, but he was faster, landing another brutal blow.

“Bastard. How dare you touch her?” Rudra roared, grabbing the man by the neck and slamming him against a tree trunk with brutal strength.

In the chaos, I heard Abhinandan's voice shout, ***“Kahaan, kaaka?*** (Where to, Uncle?)

I turned and saw him clutching Surgami Dev Singh's collar as he tried to flee. Abhinandan landed a punch that sent him sprawling to the ground.

My eyes snapped back to Rudra just in time to see him force the tall man face down into the dirt. Rudra planted his boot firmly on the man's back, grabbed a fistful of his filthy hair, and wound it tight around his palm.

I felt my heart hammering painfully in my chest. Fear coiled inside me.

Rudra pulled with all his might, his veins bulging, his face flushed with rage.

The man’s screams tore through the forest. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” His head began to bleed under the brutal pull, and the soldiers and my brothers stopped fighting, stunned into silence.

The man’s shrieks grew wilder as Rudra yanked harder, and in one final, furious motion, the skin and hair tore away in Rudra’s hand.

The man fell, still dead, on the ground, and Rudra tossed the bloody mess aside, panting heavily.

“Don’t you dare touch my love,” he growled, low and dangerous. Then he turned to Surgami Dev Singh.

“Chain him. Throw him behind bars,” he ordered, and the soldiers obeyed without question.

My eyes dropped to Rudra’s blood-stained hands. I didn’t know why, but a shiver of fear ran down my spine.

I blinked and felt Abhinandan pull me into a hug. “I missed you, Nandani,” he said softly.

Tears welled in my eyes as I wrapped my arms around him tightly. “I missed you, too, Nand,” I whispered.

He stepped back and looked at me, guilt clouding his features. “I’m sorry for whatever happened,” he said.

“And I’m sorry for how it happened,” I replied, my voice trembling.

Rudra stepped forward then. “We should head home. You’re coming too, Abhi,” he said.

Abhinandan raised an eyebrow. “Learn to request, man,” he said.

Rudra sighed, giving a tiny nod. “Alright. Please, come with us, Abhi,” he requested as demanded.

I chuckled through my tears, and Abhinandan shook his head. “I’ll never understand what you see in him. Such an egoist,” he muttered.

I laughed, tears rolling down my cheeks, and hugged him again. “You’re coming, Nand,” I said.

He kissed the top of my head warmly. “Alright, sister.”

Most of the enemy soldiers had fled. I turned to see Rudra cleaning the blood from his hands with a cloth.

A sudden realisation struck me—my head was bare, my hair loose in front of all these men.

“Come,” Rudra said, his voice gentler now.

I glanced at Abhi, who smiled and nodded encouragingly. “We’re coming right behind,” he said.

I walked toward Rudra. He helped me mount his horse and then climbed behind me.

I felt self-conscious as I noticed my brothers and the remaining soldiers watching us.

Rudra loosely wrapped his arms around me, gripping the reins, and steered the horse forward.

“We’ll see you there,” he called out to them as the horse picked up speed.

Once we had put some distance between us and the others, he slowed the horse and stopped near a running stream.

He climbed down first, then helped me down gently. “What happened?” I asked, confused by the tension in his eyes.

The night was cool, the winds strong, and a heavy silence enveloped us.

He took my hand and led me to the edge of the stream. Under the vast, dark sky, he held my fingers and kissed them tenderly, closing his eyes.

I swallowed hard, feeling him tremble slightly. He pulled me into a tight embrace, lifting me off my feet.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and nestled my face into the crook of his neck.

“Not finding you in the chamber... made me feel fear for the first time in my life,” he whispered. “For the first time, I knew what it meant to feel that terrifying shiver down the spine, that choking lump in the throat, that blind panic, the thunder crashing inside your mind. For a moment... I thought I had died,”

His words shook me to my core. He tightened his grip, kissing my neck with trembling lips.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, tears slipping down my face.

He breathed in deeply against my skin, trying to ground himself. “I don’t know how to put it into words... but I love you, Nandani. I didn’t love you like this before. Now, it feels like I can’t exist without you. I can’t stay away from you. I can’t breathe without you. When I saw you missing... it felt like my entire life had ended. The mere thought of something happening to you shook me beyond anything I’ve ever known. I’ve never felt this way for anyone. Never,”

His voice broke, turning hoarse with emotion. “Please, I beg you—never leave me. Even if you ever hate me so much that you want to kill me—kill me—but don’t leave me. I cannot exist without you. Rudra cannot exist without his Nandani, his queen,”

Tears streamed down my face as I clutched the back of his head, holding him as close as I could.

“I never will,” I managed to whisper against his ear.

“Promise me, Nandani. I was never able to understand this feeling before... but now I do. And I never want to feel it again. Please, promise me,” he mumbled, his voice trembling, his arms tightening around me.

I nodded quickly, feeling my own tears threaten to fall. “Yes, I promise. I promise, Rudra,”

I said, holding him tighter.

He stayed like that for a few moments, clinging to me, and I couldn’t stop myself from pressing a soft kiss against his neck.

“We should head back to the palace,” I said gently.

He inhaled deeply and carefully set me down. When I looked up, I saw his red, tearful eyes. He leaned down and kissed my forehead, and I gave him a small, shaky smile.

“Yes, Abhi will get suspicious if we’re late,” he said with a soft chuckle.

I laughed lightly. “Yes... I think he will,”

We walked back to the horse together, the night breeze swirling around us. As he helped me up onto the saddle, he said, “I think I have to tell you something about Abhi,”

I frowned slightly, confused. “What? I thought everything between you two was sorted now,” I said.

He nodded, though he was a little hesitant. “Yes, kind of. But this is something else,” he said, climbing up behind me.

As the horse began to move toward the palace, I asked, “What is it?”

He leaned closer and said near my ear, “The man seems to be in love,”

“WHAT???” I twisted around to look at him over my shoulder, my eyes wide.

I was amazed, surprised, and mostly utterly shocked.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

“WHAT?????” she asked, utterly shocked. I looked into her wide, stunned eyes and nodded softly.

“Yes,” I muttered, though my eyes were far too busy capturing the glow of her skin under the silver veil of moonlight. She looked so ethereal, so elegant.

My gaze fell to her lips, and before I could stop myself, I leaned closer, drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

But she pulled back, just before our lips could meet.

“What?” I asked, my voice low, almost pleading.

She stared into my eyes for a heartbeat, then closed hers briefly. “You have to clean yourself first,” she said softly. “You’re drenched in blood,”

I chuckled and nodded. “Yes, sure,” I said, sensing the hidden smile she was trying to suppress.

In no time, we reached the palace gates. I helped her climb down the horse, but she immediately lowered her gaze, tucking a loose strand behind her ear with shivery fingers.

“I’m bareheaded,” she said, her voice almost a whisper, clearly conscious of her state.

“It's okay,” I said gently. “It’s not you who should be covered all the time. It's the people's eyes that should lower when you pass,”

She smiled timidly. “You know things don't work that way,” she said quietly.

I took her hand softly in mine. “Then let's change things now,” I said, and she looked at me wide-eyed.

“I think you should ask someone to grab a dupatta for me,” she whispered, her eyes silently pleading with me.

Without a second thought, I scooped her up into my arms.

“Rudra!” she gasped, quickly biting her lip. “I mean, Ranaji,” she corrected herself in a flustered whisper, trying to push herself down.

“Everyone will see!” she protested.

I pulled her closer, hiding her face in the curve of my neck. Her long, tangled hair spilt over my shoulder, and I smiled at her.

“I've never seen you this shy little bird,” I teased, and she mumbled against my neck.

“Ye humaara sasural hai, Ranaji... yahaan hum khule sar nahi ghoom sakte…” (This is my in-laws’ house, Ranaji... I cannot be seen bareheaded here.)

I smiled and carefully set her back on her feet. She looked up at me, confused, as I took a step back and swiftly pulled off my blood-stained kurta.

She gasped, her eyes wide. “What are you doing? You have marks…” She lowered her voice, glancing around. “...I mean, you have marks from my nails... and my waist chain is visible on your wrist!”

I smirked, enjoying her flustered expression. “Now, we’re both bare something,” I said playfully, taking her hand and leading her toward the palace doors.

“Rudra, no, please—they'll see!” she whispered desperately.

Laughing under my breath, I lifted her again into my arms. “Now stay shut,” I murmured.

The soldiers at the door opened it, their heads respectfully bowed. She hid her face deeper into my neck, her hands fisting my chest.

“Aww, my love,” I teased softly, “now I know what you are most afraid of.” She didn’t respond; she just tightened her hold on me.

Inside the palace, chaos buzzed everywhere in the aftermath of the battle. Heads turned, and people stopped in their tracks, staring at us in shock and amusement.

I caught sight of Ranvijay, Agastya, and Abhinandan arriving just then.

Ranvijay lowered his gaze respectfully, Agastya smirked, and Abhinandan—well, Abhinandan glared at me like he was ready to start another war.

I grinned and pulled her even closer. “Your brother is watching, little bird,” I whispered to her.

She inhaled sharply and muttered, “Oh God, please make me dead right now. I’m unconscious. I am unconscious,”

I barely held back a chuckle.

Abhinandan stormed forward. “What happened to her? She was fine before!” he said, concern dripping in his voice.

Trying to keep a straight face, I replied, “Oh, she fell unconscious. She was already tired before Surgami Dev Singh kidnapped her,”

Abhinandan narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Why was she tired? Don’t you let her rest properly? Are you overburdening her? Are you torturing her?”

I furrowed my brows dramatically. “Hell no! She tortures me! She doesn't let me rest properly—'Rudra this', 'Rudra that',” I said teasingly.

Abhinandan gritted his teeth furiously. “Don't you dare cr—”

“I think Bhabhisa needs rest right now,” Agastya interrupted quickly, throwing an arm around Abhinandan’s shoulders.

“You all should rest, too. We’ll meet tomorrow morning,” I added, and everyone nodded—except Abhinandan, who kept shooting daggers at me with his eyes.

I carried her straight to the chamber, and the moment we entered, she wriggled down from my arms, turning to glare at me.

“So I torture you?” she asked sharply, hands on her hips.

I smirked, tossing my rings onto the table and throwing my bloodied kurta at her playfully. “Don’t you, Love?” I teased.

“I torture you?” she repeated dramatically, hands flying around animatedly as she followed me toward the bathing room.

“Yes, you do,” I said lightly.

“Look at me!” she snapped, and I turned around as I was untying the lower part of my garment.

Her eyes blazed. “How dare you say that? I protect you from my brother so much! And you told him that I tortured you? How dare you?”

I reached for the strings of her gown’s overcoat, pulling her closer. The gentle clinking of her anklet bells echoed in the dim, candlelit room. As I pulled the loose shoulder of her gown down, her voice softened.

“You shouldn’t say that,” she whispered, blinking nervously.

I stepped closer, my fingers brushing the hem of her inner garment. Her lashes fluttered rapidly, her heart pounding against my chest.

“Rudra…” she breathed, and in one swift move, I pulled the white fabric over her head, tossing it aside.

She quickly covered her neck with her hand, stepping back slightly. A timid, shy smile bloomed on her flushed cheeks.

I caught her hand and pulled her into the pool with me. She gasped as the cold water embraced her.

“It’s cold!” she squeaked, and I chuckled, diving under the water to wash away the blood.

When I surfaced, I found her wet hair clinging to her face. I pulled her closer. Water splashed around us as I pinned her against the pool wall, lifting her by her thighs so she was at my level.

Her breath hitched, her hands clutching at my shoulders as she stared at me. I looked at her lips, dripping water.

As her breathing grew heavier, my lips trembled, desperate to taste her.

The sensations from earlier today still danced in my mind. The feel of her softness, the way she clenched around me, the way her breath had turned shaky, and the knowing that I was the reason behind her beautiful surrender, even as pain had bubbled within her. She had loved it wholeheartedly, and that memory made my heart race.

Unable to resist, I leaned in closer, and she blinked nervously.

As I closed my eyes, visions of her sitting atop me flashed before me; her slender neck, her long braid, her tiny waist, her soft breasts, and her beautiful brown nipples had driven me insane.

She was like a divine force, pulling me under her spell, a force of nature I could never resist. I had never thought I'd let her have so much power over me, and I'd be feeling what I was feeling for her, love-struck.

She had made me mad for her, hopelessly drawn like a bee to a flower, a moth to a flame, a river to the sea, a man to his woman.

My lips touched hers, and she moaned softly into my mouth. “Ahhh, Rudra,” she breathed.

I angled my face, deepening the kiss, savouring her. Her head leaned back against the wall, and I sucked gently on her lips, tasting her sweetness.

When she pulled back, her eyes met mine, wide, full of emotion.

Panting lightly, I brushed her wet cheek, still marked with the faint imprint of fingers. My heart clenched, and so I kissed her cheek softly, again and again, until it turned bright with a shy blush.

She gazed at me, her look tender yet timid.

Understanding passed between us without words, and she shook her head slightly, probably sensing what I wanted.

I knew she thought I might lose control again, but I wouldn’t hurt her. So, instead, I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead to ground myself.

She exhaled deeply, melting into my hold.

I carried her out of the pool, her body shivering slightly from the cold. She squeezed the water from her hair and grabbed a white cloth to wrap around herself.

“No need to dress,” I murmured, holding her hand and leading her to the bed.

The room still smelled like us, the broken bangles on the floor, the crumpled sheets, everything speaking of our sensational time.

“Let's sleep,” I said gently, and she nodded. We lay down, and she nestled herself against my chest.

I carefully moved her long, wet hair away from her face, letting her settle into me.

She was my world.

It might sound like an exaggeration, but to a man who had never known peace, she was home.

The noise around me and within me went quiet for the first time. I felt composed.

She fell asleep quickly while I stayed awake, my fingers softly combing through her hair. Our naked chests pressed together, sharing warmth.

I wasn’t sleepy; I was too consumed by her presence, too overwhelmed by all the emotions I had never allowed myself to feel before.

I was never so outrageous; instead, I was strategic and disciplined. I measured every step and every action. But anger rose in me when I remembered how that man had touched her, grabbed her hair, slapped her, and it made me mad beyond anything I had ever known.

I had faced death a thousand times without fear, but I realised I was terrified. Terrified not for myself, but for her.

I kissed her head and whispered, “You are not little, Nandani. You are the ocean that captured me like it drags everything close to it, the mountains that held me

firm like I am a river, the rain that quenched the thirst of my soul, the sky that gave me hope to love again. You are the goddess who tamed the beast in me,”

My fingers continued moving through her damp hair, untangling every strand tenderly.

“On the battlefield, I was the death that feared nothing. I never knew fear, never knew pain,” I whispered. “But today, the thought of something hurting you... It terrified me. You are my strength, my fire, my light in the darkness. You are everything to me, everything,”

I smiled softly, feeling the overwhelming truth of my words. “And you know, Nandani, if you had married anyone else but me, I would have let myself die on the battlefield. I knew it from the moment I saw you,”

I breathed in her scent as my hand moved gently across her scalp. “And when I first saw you in your kingdom ... deep down, I knew. ‘This girl—she’s going to be your undoing, Rudra.’ And yet, losing to you has been the greatest victory of my life,”

I chuckled under my breath. “I used to think my mother was foolish for blindly loving my father.

But now... I understand her. When your world shrinks to just one person, seeing your day, your night, your hunger, your thirst, your entire existence in them feels magical. It feels euphoric. And it’s terrifying too, but it's the most beautiful thing I’ve ever known,”

I leaned down to kiss her hair again, wrapping my arms tighter around her. I kept caressing her head, playing with her loose tresses.

She was my treasure, my greatest gift. She was my control, and yet, my greatest desire. She was the blessing of my lifetime's penance. She was everything.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I inhaled deeply as a sharp pain travelled down my neck.

“Ahh,” A soft cry escaped my lips, and it felt like my whole body froze. I lifted my lashes slightly, only for the brightness sneaking through the cracks of the bed’s curtains to invade my eyes.

Stretching my legs sent a shivering wave of pain through me, and I pressed my palms against my face, trying to escape the lingering pull of my dreamland.

When I finally opened my eyes, my gaze landed on my husband lying peacefully beside me.

His arm was draped around my waist, holding me close, and a faint smile touched my lips. His face looked so calm, almost innocent in his sleep. My head was resting on his biceps, and as I tried to move closer, a cry slipped out again, the soreness holding me still.

He stirred, inhaling a deep breath, and slowly opened his sleepy eyes to look at me.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice low, gravelly with sleep.

I nodded slightly.

Without a word, he pulled me closer effortlessly until my forehead pressed against his chest. Our naked bodies touched, and he guided my leg gently over his hip, tucking me into him.

He touched my chin, lifting it tenderly, locking our eyes. His gaze had something different—a softness, a glow I had never seen before. He leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on my lips.

I fluttered my eyes closed at the tenderness of his mouth on mine. When he pulled back, his hand beneath my head shifted to caress my back with slow, careful strokes.

“Are you okay, Nandani?” he asked again, and I nodded, though my body betrayed me with tiny, trembling breaths.

His eyes searched mine, and his hand slid from my chin to my waist, pulling me closer until our lips brushed again.

With my legs parted, I could feel him hard against me, and my cheeks heated in response.

His gaze deepened. “Are you sore?” he asked in a husky voice, his lips brushing against mine, and I nodded shyly.

He bit his lip, holding back something primal, and then, with aching slowness, he shifted and gently rolled me beneath him.

His body caged mine, and my eyes blinked at him, timid and unsure. He leaned closer, his voice promising, “I'll be gentle this time. I swear,”

I swallowed nervously as he moved lower, pressing soft kisses down my chest, my stomach, and further.

“Rudra,” I breathed, my fingers tangling in his hair as he kissed his way to my most sensitive place, sore yet desperate for his touch.

He parted my legs more. And the moment his lips touched me, a violent shiver ran through my body, and a loud moan escaped before I could stop it, my head falling back helplessly.

As he flicked his tongue out, delving it into my wetness, steadily licking, I clamped onto the bedsheet to keep myself from vanishing entirely into the realm of sensations.

“Ohhh… Rudra,” I gasped, my hand flying to my mouth to muffle the sounds.

“No,” he muttered against my skin, sending vibrations. “I want to hear you,”

“Wha...what?” I stammered, but he sucked harder, making me jolt under him.

“I said I want to hear my name,” he growled, “while I do all of this to you,”

Shivering uncontrollably, I moved my hand away from my mouth, and he leaned in again and sent me spiralling, teasing me, tasting me, devouring me until my release hit.

My body shook, and my legs trembled, mouth panting open. His eyes met mine as he licked me one last time, slowly and deliberately.

I mewled as he kissed my waist softly before pulling back. His lips were red, glistening with me, and his hair fell messily over his forehead as he looked at me like a starving predator.

He sat up, caressing my thighs, and with one swift pull, he dragged me closer.

“Please...be gentle,” I begged, my voice trembling.

He spat into his hand, stroking his erect manhood, and I bit my lower lip at the sight, overwhelmed by how hungry and masculine he looked.

He shook his head. “No. Keep your eyes open,” he commanded, voice deep and rough. “And don’t you dare cover your voice,”

“Understand?” he asked.

I nodded, my whole body flushed, heart pounding wildly.

He placed himself at my entrance and pushed in slowly, carefully, but the stretch still made me whimper.

A soft, aching cry slipped out, but it wasn’t just pain; I felt pleasure too, raw and consuming.

He began moving his hips slowly, carefully, his chest heaving with effort. I watched the fine muscles of his abs flexing, the dark line of hair leading down his stomach, the V-cut of his hips.

My cheeks burned hotter just seeing him, my husband, my Rudra. I had never, even in my wildest imagination, thought he’d get so intense while making love to me, turning me into a moaning mess.

His thrusts grew more profound, steady and hypnotic, moving my body with his.

“I want to do something... really bad,” he said suddenly.

“Aahhhhhhh, wh... what?” I panted.

He cupped my neck gently, making my lashes flutter closed. His hand was so hot, so possessive, against my skin.

“Just once,” he whispered, “please,” I nodded weakly, surrendering everything to him.

His grip tightened around my throat just enough to make me lose my last shred of sanity. I moaned wildly, no longer able to hold anything back.

His movements grew faster, harder, rougher, and I gave myself to him completely.

Our breathing grew ragged, wild. He finally loosened his hand from my throat, and I gasped for air, panting uncontrollably.

“Aaaa… Rudra,” I sobbed his name, a desperate cry from the core of my being.

He didn’t stop until my knees shook uncontrollably and my body cried out in exhaustion.

“Pleaseeee... aaaahhh... no more,” I finally gasped.

At once, he pulled out, and I shivered from head to toe. I couldn’t match his strength. He was just too much for me. I was utterly spent.

A tear slipped from the corner of my eye. He immediately collapsed beside me, unfinished, pulling me into his arms protectively.

I straightened my legs, still trembling, and turned to him. “I’m sorry... I can help you finish,” I whispered shyly.

He pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. “Never,” he said firmly.

I looked up at him, seeing the wild pounding of his chest and the sweat glistening on his forehead. “You've ruined me, Nandani. You've made me insane for you,” he said, and a shy, shaky smile crept onto my lips.

“Would you mind... a slow finish?” I asked gently.

He smiled, his thumb brushing my cheek. “You’re already sore," he said, voice thick with love, “And I don’t want you fainting... especially with your brother visiting the kingdom,”

He said, and I smiled.

“Don't worry. I would love to faint and expect nothing less from you,” I said, trying to straighten myself up. A terrible pain and muscle strain shot through my body.

He immediately helped me sit, adjusting his back on a pile of pillows against the headboard.

He gently gathered me into his arms, and slowly, I took him in. My eyes filled with tears. “Don't touch me for at least six months after this,”

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and he smiled a little, pulling me even closer. “As you wish, my Queen,”

He placed a tender kiss on my cheek, sucking away the tears while making me shift against him. His hands wrapped protectively around me, and his fingers gently ran through my open hair. Surprisingly, it wasn't tangled anymore; I only noticed it now.

“Did you... untangle my hair?” I managed to ask.

He placed his lips softly on my neck. “Yes,” he murmured, and I felt the ticklish warmth of his breath against my skin.

“Shall I start moving, little love?” he whispered.

I pressed my lips against his neck. “Yes... gently, please,” I muttered.

He deepened his kiss on my neck, and my fingers gently found their way to fist into his back. Our naked bodies melted against each other as he slowly started moving me onto his lap. The pain still lingered, but the pleasure growing within me slowly overshadowed it. My mind oozed into a daze, and my eyes teared up again, overwhelmed.

He pressed his lips against mine and muttered against them, “I swear, no one could ever handle me the way you do, Nandani,”

I smiled and captured his lips fully, whispering against them, “I love you, Rudra,”

“You completed me, Nandani,” he muttered, his forehead against mine. “I always knew there was a hollowness inside me... but now, I don't feel it anymore,”

I smiled warmly, our bodies moving together, our hips in sync. The slow intensity built until I longed for another release, feeling hot and wild under his touch.

He smiled, looking at me, his voice low and full of adoration. “I love it when you get needy,” he teased.

Unable to resist, I bit his lips gently but firmly. He only smiled against the bite, cupping my nape to keep me close. Our foreheads touched again, and the movement between us grew faster, more frantic, our bodies dancing.

The sound of my anklets grew wilder, mingling with our heavy breathing, until finally, we both had our release together, making me moan and him groan.

I felt his warmth fill me as my whole body shook and collapsed against him. He immediately pulled me into his arms, wrapping the comforter around us.

Still panting hard, he clapped twice to call for the attendants.

I struggled to focus on breathing when I heard a voice from beyond the curtains. “Ji, Ranaji,” she called.

“Prepare a hot bath for us,” he said. “And warm the massage oil for Ranisa.”

I immediately looked at him, wide-eyed. “Massage oil?” I asked.

He nodded, his voice tender. “Yes. You'll feel better with it,”

“You're not going to massage my body, are you?” I asked shyly.

He kissed my forehead and said, “I don't trust anyone else when it comes to caring for you after we make love. It's only my right, and my duty,”

Lowering my gaze, I hugged him tightly. “God, I never knew someone like you existed,” I whispered.

He chuckled. “Me neither,”

I chuckled harder with him. “Thank you so much, Rudra,” I said.

He lifted my chin with his finger and asked, “For what?”

I bit my lower lip, smiling softly. “For going insane and wild for me. For making me feel like I have the power to tame a beast,”

He chuckled deeply. “Aww, you do tame a beast, with that tiny body and mesmerising eyes,” I smiled wider.

“But... I also hate you for making me cry,” I pouted.

He gently caressed my head. “I'm sorry, but I can't help it,” he whispered.

I kissed his chest. “And I love that,” I admitted.

Suddenly, we heard the attendant's voice again, calling from afar, “Ranaji, massage oil,”

“Leave it on the table,” Rudra ordered. “Close the door, and don't let anyone inside without permission,”

He pressed a slow kiss to my lips as the sound of anklets faded away and the door clicked shut.

“Let's do it again,” he murmured against my lips.

I immediately pushed him away, eyes wide. “You want me dead?!”

He chuckled heartily and stood up, parting the curtains so sunlight flooded the chamber. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he picked up the bowl of massage oil from the table and returned to the bed.

He sat at the edge and pulled at the comforter. “Move it aside,” he said.

I clutched the comforter closer. “I'm naked,” I protested.

He smirked. “And I've seen it all, little wife,”

Blushing furiously, I finally let him pull the comforter aside and lie comfortably, though I still grabbed a corner of the comforter to cover my middle.

He smiled knowingly and began rubbing the oil between his palms. His hands touched my feet, moving in slow, circular motions. I already felt like I was floating in heaven.

“Where did you learn this?” I asked, curious.

He smiled mischievously, now rubbing up my legs with firmer strokes. “You don't want to know, little bird,”

I furrowed my brows. “Yes, I do,”

He shook his head. “No,”

Playfully, I kicked his chest and insisted. “Yes!”

He chuckled, his touch becoming even firmer. “No,”

His repeated denial started making something churn in my stomach. My heart raced as a sudden suspicion took hold of me.

“Wait, a moment…” I said, my voice tightening. “You had an affair before me?!”

He thinned his brows with a smile and chuckled deeply. “Are you mad?” he said, and I inhaled a breath of relief.

“Then tell me,” I insisted, watching his face shift from a playful smile to a more serious expression.

“It was Uncle,” he said quietly. “He used to teach me about massages. Apart from being a king's guard, I was also a masseur, an attendant, and a servant,”

A wave of sadness travelled down my heart.

“Then why didn't you kill him, Rudra? Why leave him rotting in the cellar? He deserves to be beheaded,” I said with pain threading my voice.

He looked at me calmly. “I wanted to kill him when I found out he had dared to lay his dirty hands on you. But he didn't actually touch you... So he isn't a criminal in that sense. Also,” he paused, “no matter how badly he treated me, we share the same blood. I couldn't kill family. But I couldn't free him either,”

I smiled faintly at his words. “Sometimes, it feels like I’m not talking to the wrathful, mighty Rudra, but to a mature, peaceful Ranaji,” I said softly. He chuckled at that.

Suddenly, he pulled me closer and kissed my toes, making me giggle. His hands were now massaging my thighs. “You might not feel it now, but soon it’s going to hurt,” he warned.

I frowned and asked, “How are you so sure?”

He smiled while working his hands in long, warm strokes along my legs.

“Unlike you, I exercise,” he teased.

I gasped, offended. “How rude!” I pouted, and he just chuckled deeper.

He continued massaging my body, my legs, waist, lower abdomen, midriff, arms, wrists, back, and neck, one by one, patiently and thoroughly.

By the time he gently turned me onto my stomach, I felt utterly exposed. But somehow, his steady hands and the way he treated my body with such calmness made me feel warm, safe, and accepted. For once, I wasn’t self-conscious.

Once he finished, he said softly, “We’ll bathe soon. The oil will ease your muscle pain,”

I nodded, feeling dizzy and heavy with sleep. “Okay,” I mumbled.

I heard him chuckle and say, “Don’t you dare fall asleep now, little wife. Your brother’s here in the palace,” he warned.

I smiled lazily and placed my head on his lap. His fingers lightly ran through my hair, and his touch made me feel more beautiful. I didn’t even realise when I drifted into sleep.

When I woke up, he was gently shaking me. “Hey, little bird, get up. Duty calls,” he whispered.

I stretched my arms and hugged his waist tightly. “Take me to the bath,” I muttered sleepily.

I felt him chuckle and then lift me easily into his arms. I barely opened my eyes until the warm water touched my body, and with it, a sharp, burning pain in my core.

As I let out a faint cry, he gently rubbed my back. “It will ease soon,” he said softly.

I leaned back against his chest, wrapping his arm tightly around me. His lips brushed against my ear, and the warmth of the water, the sound of his breath, the steady beat of his heart wrapped around me like a living cocoon of love.

I had always wondered what being married to Rudra would be like. I had thought it would not be easy. That he would dominate me, and there would be no softness. I thought life wouldn't be a bed of roses with him.

But here I was, gladly submitting myself to a Rudra who was both possessive and tender, both rough and gentle, both dominant and vulnerable.

In that moment, when his arms were wrapped around me, his breath tickled my ear, and his hands soothed my aches, I felt truly alive.

A life I had chosen bravely, one I wanted to live with all my heart. If he fought, I would fight back. If he loves, I would love back. If storms came, we would weather them together because it was easy to move on with another man after a betrayal. But not when your soul belonged to someone already.

We have just one soul. So it is only right to be careful who you give it to.

I knew Rudra loved me. Because the mind can lie, and even the heart can be tricked. But the voice inside your soul never lies.

I felt him inhale deeply as we remained in the bath in silence, our bodies talking in ways words could never have. He wasn't more than I, and I wasn’t any less. We were equals, and that was the beauty of our bond. It is beautiful when you give your everything to someone, and that person returns it with their everything, too. It is truly the best feeling one can feel in life.

When we finally stepped out of the bath, sunlight poured into the chamber, making our skin glow. We laughed and helped each other get dressed, the world outside waiting for the King and Queen, but inside these nine-parted chambers, we were just two people in love, just Rudra Nandani.

I was happy we were trying our best, not bringing our titles, recognitions, and achievements inside the chamber, because everything else falls away where love exists. It needs no title, no recognition, no religion, no culture. It is pure and is empowered.

But to live, love is not sufficient. It is a hope, yes, a burning flame that gives us a sense of comfort, purpose, and the joy of being alive, and yet ruins us in ways we can’t imagine.

For love, it is malleable, shaped by circumstances and choices. It adapts to the way we want. If we choose to fight the world and claim the person we love, it is strength, and if we make ourselves stronger, letting the other person go, yet keeping our love alive in our heart, it is freedom, sacred.

Love is beautiful, yet so wrathful. Love can either make us or break us.

And we had seen both sides of it. We witnessed its beauty and its wrath. It broke us, and it made us.

We looked into each other's eyes. It was mesmerising as he leaned in and kissed me softly, sending butterflies fluttering inside me. I giggled, feeling alive.

"You're glowing, little wife," he said.

I chuckled. "All thanks to your ten years of hard work,"

He burst into laughter, and I joined him, heart full.

I watched him take a pinch of vermilion and press it into the parting of my hair with utmost care. "Mine, finally," he said, his voice a whisper.

I smiled and blushed deeply. He looked so handsome in maroon. I stood on my toes and kissed his cheek. "Mine too," I said, grinning.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Rudra called.

An attendant entered with a bowl in her hands. He took it from her and said, "You may leave. And shut the door behind you,"

She bowed and left quietly.

I frowned a little. "What's this?" I asked, curious.

I asked, and he placed the bowl on the table. His face turned a little serious. "Birth control," he said.

I looked at him, surprised. "What?"

"You are too young for a baby, Nandani," he said, his voice calm but firm.

I swallowed slightly. "But... you're not," I said softly.

"I know," he said, "but we still have a lot to figure out,"

"In what terms?" I asked, frowning.

He clicked his tongue. "This is all new for me—this royal life, being a king. You're used to it, but I'm still learning. I don't want our child to suffer the way I did. If we're going to bring a new life into this world, it should be because we choose to, with full hearts, not by accident,"

I knitted my brows, trying to understand. "I don't get you," I said.

He gulped and looked away for a moment before speaking again. "My father had so many wives. So many children. What were we? What are we now—the three of us? Ranvijay, Agastya, and I? He didn't want us. We were just... born, a byproduct of pleasure. I see it everywhere, even now—young kids suffering because their parents weren't ready. They bring children into this harsh world without even a thought about raising them right. Why call a soul into life if you can't love it properly? Why create a life only to neglect it?"

His eyes turned misty, his voice trembling. “Why do children have to be the outcome of a pleasurable act? Some people yearn for kids, and such people deserve them, not the ones who do not even provide them with the comforts and the joy they deserve. My father never understood the responsibility of having children,” he spoke, his lips trembling.

“And I’m not my father. I don't want that for our children. I don’t want to bring a child into this world when I know we’re still finding our ground. I want our children to have everything we never had,” he finished. Hearing the rawness in his voice, I immediately stepped forward and hugged him tightly.

“I know,” I whispered. “I understand... and I’m proud of you for thinking this way. Children are blessings. They deserve to be wanted, not just born out of a moment of pleasure,”

He wrapped his arms around me tightly. “I love you so much, Nandani. But... if you truly want children now, I’ll still do everything I can to give you, and them, the best life,” he said.

I pulled back slightly, frowning. “Them?”

He smiled, a hint of playfulness creeping back. “Yes, them. At least six to ten children!”

My mouth fell open. “No!”

He chuckled. “Yes!”

I shook my head vigorously. “No way. I’m done!”

“What?! Why?!” he exclaimed, laughing.

“I am so done with you!” I said, pretending to be furious.

He laughed harder and pulled me close. “Just joking,” he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Whatever you want, little wife, I will obey,”

I smiled as he gently nudged the bowl back into my hands. “The soup is getting cold, Nandani,” he said.

I inhaled deeply and took a sip—

“Yuccckkkkkkkk!” I gagged immediately, feeling like throwing up.

He chuckled, taking the bowl to taste it himself. “It’s good,” he said, amused.

I shook my head dramatically. “Noooo!”

Still laughing, he handed it back to me. I forced myself to finish it somehow.

“I’m never drinking this again,” I said, grimacing. “You better learn to pull out!”

He burst into laughter again, just as there was a loud knock on the door.

“Looks like your brother is awake,” Rudra said, pulling me close for a forehead kiss.

I smiled up at him and whispered, “Come. Let’s make things right again,”

He nodded, and we walked to the door together after one last glance in the mirror.

When I opened it, there stood Abhinandan, his hair messy, looking like he had just gotten out of bed. His gaze travelled from me to Rudra, his expression twisting

in disgust.

“Why are you always around her?” he asked Rudra.

In return, he smiled and casually stepped forward. “Because she always needs me,” he said smoothly.

Abhinandan frowned deeper. “Why do you always need him?” he asked me.

I bit my lower lip, understanding Rudra’s teasing undertone. I didn't answer.

Instead, Rudra placed a hand on Abhinandan’s shoulder and said, “Because I’m the only one who can fulfil all her nee—”

“Shut up, Rudra!” I cut him off quickly.

He chuckled. “Alright, I’ll leave you two alone. Please, don’t fight over me,” he teased.

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself,” Abhinandan muttered under his breath. Rudra just smiled and walked away.

I looked at Abhinandan, sighing. “Idiot,” he grumbled, and I chuckled.

“Come, Nandan,” I said, returning to the couch. He followed, sitting beside me with a frustrated sigh.

After a heavy pause, he finally asked, “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Are you?”

He nodded back, but the stiffness in his body betrayed him.

He lifted his worried gaze and said, “You could have told me, Nandani,”

I exhaled deeply. “I know,” I nodded. “I could’ve. But everything happened so fast... and I was afraid. I thought everyone would judge me for falling in love with the son of our enemy,”

He shifted closer. “I’m sorry I didn’t build enough trust for you to feel safe telling me,” he said softly.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t about trust, Nandan. You and everyone else gave me love and comfort. It’s just that at that moment, I was waiting for him to talk to Father properly. I was so in love with him. And then... everything fell apart so suddenly—”

“Suddenly, he broke your heart... and you still forgave him,” he said, cutting me off with a pained voice.

I bit my lower lip, feeling the sting of those words. I nodded. “Yes. He broke my heart... and I still forgave him. Because he admitted he was wrong. Because he tried to win my heart back,” I said quietly.

“Why break the heart if you want to win it back?” Abhinandan asked bitterly.

I shook my head again. “I don’t know, Nandan. I just know I love him... and he loves me. I never saw my life with anyone else,” I tried reasoning.

“And yet he played with you, dumped you, and used you for his sick games,” he said, his voice shaking.

I shook my head firmly. “That’s not true. He didn’t know about his father,” I said.

Abhinandan let out a short, bitter laugh.

“You may call it anything, all I understand is that he doesn't deserve you, Nandani. And it’s not too late to rethink your decision. He could be anything but a good husband. He played with you, used you, and I don't understand how you can forgive him just like that,” he said, frustration etched across his face. I lowered my gaze, feeling my heart grow heavy. Tears threatened to fall from my eyes.

“I don't know, Nandan,” I said. “But I feel complete when I am with him, close to him. It makes me feel happy from within,” I took a moment to put it in words. “He might not be the perfect husband, or even perfect at all, but he’s the best lover one could ever have,”

Exhaling heavily, I turned completely to him. “You see, Nandan, someone who holds the power to break you and still make you whole... there’s something so profound about that. I don't know what energy he radiates, but I have always belonged to him. From the moment I laid eyes on him to the last moment I’d see him, I would belong to him—in good and in bad times, in love, and even in pain. Because love isn't always blooming and beautiful. It hurts, sometimes, it breaks you, it moulds you, it defines you. It holds you and it makes you. And I’m lucky enough to have seen it all,”

I furrowed my brows, explaining what I truly felt. “Perfect, dreamy love is just a phase; real love is much deeper than that. What you see in him is different from what I see in him. The way he looks at me like I’m the last person he ever wants to see... the way he smiles around me, as if I’m the only reason he’s happy... the way he cares for me, as if he feels solely responsible for me... the way he holds back from overpowering me, as if he would give up anything for me... It’s so beautiful, thrilling, overwhelming, almost,”

A gentle smile tugged at my lips as I looked at my twin, listening to me intently. “I have seen every side of him—the good, the bad, the dangerous, the gentle—everything. Never has anyone been so transparent with me as Rudra has. He doesn’t love me because I love him; he just loves me unconditionally. And so I can never hate him. I can get angry, yes, but hate? Never. Because I know, my soul knows, I belong to him,” I finished, drawing a deep breath.

A single tear slipped down my cheek as memories of our first meeting flooded my mind.

“Oh,” Nandan breathed, frowning. “Sounds like trouble to me,” he added playfully, making me chuckle.

“Shut up,” I warned lightly, wiping my tears away.

“Come here,” he said, shifting closer, pulling me into a hug. “Let bygones be bygones. If you are happy and healthy, that’s all that matters to me,” he said warmly, and I smiled, closing my eyes.

“But,” he added mischievously, “I hope he doesn’t trouble you too much,”

I suddenly laughed. “No, not much. But I trouble him a lot,” I said, and he burst into laughter.

“I wouldn't expect anything less,” he said, still laughing.

“Do you remember when the three of us went hunting, and it suddenly rained?” he asked, and I nodded eagerly.

“Yes! And Rudra slipped in the mud, and while helping him, you slipped too,” I added, and we both laughed hard at the memory.

Our conversations continued until late morning, and soon I asked the attendant to bring breakfast for Abhinandan.

“Ask for him too, let's eat together,” he said, and I smiled, asking the attendant to call Rudra as well.

After a while, Rudra joined us, and the three of us sat down to eat.

“Seems like things are good again between you two,” Rudra teased, and I nodded, smiling brightly.

“Yes, seems like it,” I replied.

He grinned, and suddenly Abhinandan said, “But honestly, it would've been better if you hadn’t come into our lives,” he joked, laughing while chewing his food.

“Ask your sister to say that,” Rudra shot back, smirking at me.

Their banter filled the room with laughter, and just seeing them together again brought happy tears to my eyes.

“By the way, when are you two planning to make me an uncle?” Abhinandan asked out of nowhere, and I instantly glanced at Rudra, who gave a shy smile, blushing a little.

My cheeks warmed up as memories from the early morning resurfaced in my mind.

“Not anytime soon,” Rudra said firmly.

“Why? Are you impotent?” Abhinandan teased, and my eyes widened in shock.

Rudra shot a glare at him. “Shut up, Abhi,” he growled.

“Or what?” Abhinandan challenged playfully.

“I have your secrets,” Rudra said darkly.

“What secrets?” I immediately asked, suspicious. They both glanced at each other, exchanging quick looks, but said nothing. “Tell me. Now,” I insisted.

Their eyes widened as if they'd suddenly remembered I was sitting there. “What? I said, Tell me what you're talking about,” I repeated firmly.

“You can't,” Abhinandan said quickly to Rudra, but Rudra replied softly, “She’s my wife. She’s asking,”

I gritted my teeth. “Don't tell me it’s about a girl,” I warned, narrowing my eyes. Rudra bit his lower lip. “So, it is about a girl! And if I’m not wrong, it’s about Rudra’s sister, isn’t it, Nandan?” I asked sharply, looking at Abhinandan.

He clicked his tongue and smiled nervously. “It’s nothing serious,” he said hurriedly.

I lowered my gaze for a moment and then looked at Rudra, whose shocked face gave away that it was indeed serious.

“Rudra, do you know anything?” I asked again.

He looked at me, then at Abhinandan, then back at me, and again at Abhinandan.

“What the hell are you two hiding?” I asked, growing angrier.

“I think... I do, Nandani,” Rudra said finally, and Abhinandan immediately cut in,

“No, it’s nothing! She’s getting married soon anyway!” he said hastily, trying to cover up.

Now I was utterly shocked. Rudra’s face screamed seriousness while Abhinandan was trying to brush it off. I could feel there was something they weren’t telling me.

“Ranaji,” an attendant’s voice interrupted, and we all turned toward her.

“Yes?” Rudra responded.

“Guruji has come to meet you and Ranisa,” she said respectfully, and Rudra looked at me with amused eyes.

“What? Guruji?” he asked, surprised.

We all quickly got up and made our way to the guest chamber. I pulled my veil down properly and followed Rudra and Abhinandan.

As we entered, Rudra and I bent down to touch Guruji’s feet. He blessed us warmly.

“May God bless you with a beautiful and brave son,” he said kindly. Abhinandan also bent down to take his blessings.

Guruji smiled warmly and then handed Rudra a scroll.

“With the grace of God, we have found an eligible bachelor for our Trisha. We have decided to marry her on the twentieth day of next month,” he announced.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Abhinandan’s face turn pale at the news. I watched Rudra, who smiled and accepted the invitation with reverence, touching it to his forehead.

“We will surely come, Guruji,” Rudra said, and Guruji smiled warmly.

“Prince Abhinandan, I have also visited Mahabaleshgarh to invite your family. I will be delighted if you would join us as well,” he added, and Abhinandan managed to plaster a polite smile. Yet, I could sense something was off.

“Ji, Guruji,” Abhinandan replied courteously.

Guruji then turned his attention to Rudra and spoke, “Rudra, this week is very auspicious for the coronation of the new king and queen. You should consider performing the Yagna soon. The longer the delay, the more people might believe you invaded Suryagarh unjustly,”

Rudra nodded respectfully, “Ji, Guruji. I will definitely consider it. However, there are a few matters I must resolve first,”

Guruji smiled in understanding, and Rudra added, “You must rest now, Guruji. I will personally ensure everything you need is arranged,”

Guruji blessed us again, and we took our leave. As we stepped out of the chamber, Abhinandan suddenly said, “I have to go,”

I turned to him, surprised. “What? Why?”

He raked a hand through his hair and shook his head, clearly troubled.

“Something urgent,” he muttered before hastily leaving, not giving me the chance to ask anything more.

Rudra, too, disappeared somewhere, and I was left standing there alone, confused.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Things had been going well, and everything was eventually falling into place, yet something was unsaid in the air.

Days passed, but we still had no news about Chandramukhi. Whenever I asked Rudra, he’d either smile or change the topic, pretending it wasn’t worth discussing..

Guruji left on the same day he arrived. Abhinandan had also been gone for three days now.

The memory of the look on his face, the burning in his eyes, haunted me. It was the same look Rudra once had... for me.

“Enjoying the stargazing?”

Rudra’s voice broke the silence, and I turned to see him, a smile playing on his lips.

“Ji, Ranaji,” I replied shyly, straightening up.

He walked toward me and sat down on the carpet. It had been days since we had relaxed in the courtyard like we had in the beginning, under the blanket of stars and the soft music of the winds.

I stared at him, shifting closer. He lay down and placed his head on my lap. He looked dangerously handsome, his face glowing in the moonlight.

A soft smile graced my lips as my fingers instinctively moved to his hair.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

He stared up at the stars and shook his head. “Does something need to happen for me to lie in my wife's lap?” he teased, making me chuckle.

“No,” I replied softly, biting my lower lip.

Silence stretched between us as I continued threading my fingers through his hair. He kept staring at the sky, and I couldn't help but stare at him.

“Rudra... can I ask you something?” I whispered, and he hummed.

“You once said it wouldn’t have mattered to you if I had married someone else,” I began hesitantly.

“It was a lie?” he answered instantly, not even a second of hesitation. My heart fluttered wildly at how simply he accepted it.

“Weren't you ever afraid of losing me?” I pressed.

He caught my hand from his head and brought it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss. “I was. I am. And I always will be,” he said. “This is the only fear I carry, not in a romantic way, because romance fades... but as a lover,”

He inhaled deeply, the stars reflecting in his eyes. “When you find that one person you can trust with your soul, who becomes your whole family, your home... the fear of losing them never leaves. But even if I lose you someday, I’ll be content, because I had you, and loving you is the sweetest, most intoxicating experience I have ever known,”

“Intoxicating?” I chuckled, blinking back the emotion swelling in my chest. “Am I a drug?” I teased.

He grinned mischievously. “The most powerful and dangerous one,” he whispered.

We kept talking about ourselves, about the past and the future, until I slowly drifted off to sleep, cocooned in the comfort of his presence.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

A gentle touch stirred me from my slumber, and blinking against the early morning mist, I found myself still lying under the vast sky, surrounded by peace, in his and nature’s embrace.

“Good morning, little dove,” he whispered, pressing a kiss just below my ear.

I stretched lazily, feeling the cool morning air brush against my skin. “Why are you awake so early?” I mumbled.

I felt his fingers gently sliding my rings off. “Your fragrance... it was driving me crazy,” he murmured.

“Right now?” I teased, half-asleep.

He kissed my bare fingers and nodded. “Hnn-hnn,”

I chuckled, looking into his dark, playful eyes.

“But Ranaji, if I remember correctly, we decided to take at least a week's break,” I reminded him teasingly.

He smirked, looking at me with a glint of mischief. “Are you still sore?” he asked, and I shook my head shyly.

Truthfully, I had been. The last time had exhausted me—my body aching in painful and strangely satisfying ways.

“No,” I answered softly.

“Then let me taste you,” he whispered flirtatiously, and I gasped, pushing him away playfully and sitting up.

“Shut up,” I scolded, picking up the earrings I had removed the night before.

I could feel his hand trailing over the bare skin of my back, sending shivers through me.

When I turned, he was staring into my eyes with an intensity, like he wanted to eat me raw, which made my stomach twist.

So he was indeed serious about it.

And then, without a warning, his lips captured mine. I tried to pull back in surprise, but he cupped my face, deepening the kiss, forcing me to lean into him.

He hovered over me, reclining me back on the carpeted floor, and I tried to balance myself with my hand.

“Not here, Rudra,” I managed to mumble against his mouth, but he pressed me further gently.

“Why not?” His breath was hot against my lips as he passionately nibbled my lower lip.

I tried to move slightly. “Someone might see,” I whispered, my heartbeat hammering wildly.

He looked into my eyes, unbothered. “I don't care,” he said, and my heart flipped inside my chest.

I felt his feet move against mine. Parting my lips, I blinked nervously, locking eyes with him as he mischievously hooked his toe in my anklet, nudging my legs apart.

A shiver raced through my body, and I closed my lashes tightly as he pressed a kiss against my cheek, his hand slowly sliding down from my face to my thighs. Instinctively, I bent one knee, and my abdomen tightened when I felt him pulling up my skirt. I opened my eyes and met his smouldering gaze.

“Be a good little wife, and undo my lower, Nandani,” he murmured.

My heart thundered wildly in my chest. I bit my lower lip, struggling to contain the rush of heat flooding my body.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” he asked, and I narrowed my brows slightly.

“What’s the difference?” I whispered, letting my fingers find the ties at his waist. He was already half-undressed, and the warmth radiating from his body enveloped me.

“Come prepared if you ever want to find out,” he said lowly, and I swallowed hard, lowering my gaze as I unfastened his lower garment.

My fingertips brushed his lower abdomen, and he caught my lips in a searing kiss. His breath was warm and shaky against me.

A soft gasp slipped from his lips, and I felt him shiver when I accidentally shifted against his hard arousal, making my stomach flutter with a wicked sense of pride.

A playful smile curved my lips as I wrapped my hand around his erection. He jolted slightly, his lips parting, forehead resting against mine, as I slowly stroked

him.

“Oh... my goodness,” he breathed shakily, his body growing hotter, and he grew even harder under my touch, pressing firmly against my belly. I could feel the wetness pooling between my thighs.

He pushed my lehenga higher, and with my other hand, I shoved his lower garment down completely. Settling between my legs, he grabbed my hand and guided it to cup him.

My heart pounded furiously, and I shut my eyes just as he thrust into me without warning.

A sharp cry tore from my throat. It felt rough, dry, and hot. Tears welled up at the corners of my eyes as my thighs instinctively pressed together, my hands pushing lightly against his abdomen, overwhelmed by the sudden fullness in me.

I opened my eyes to see his brows furrowed in concentration. Suddenly, he grabbed both my wrists, pinning them over my head.

Another moan escaped me as he buried himself completely inside, moving wildly, his devastating thrusts that left me breathless.

He intertwined our fingers and rested his forehead against mine, continuing his relentless rhythm, turning me into a gasping, moaning mess beneath him.

“Aap apne bade hone ka tanik adhik hi laabh uthaate hain, Rudra,” (You take too much advantage of being a few years older than me.) I said in a shaky voice, meeting his intense gaze.

A sudden mischievous smile tugged at his lips, and he flipped me over onto him, gripping my arms to steady me as he made me straddle him.

I gasped at the overwhelming sensation of him stretching me even deeper. My head fell back in a helpless moan.

“Then ride me... like you want,” he said, his voice thick with desire.

Panting, I steadied myself with my hands on his chest. His hand lazily moved to my thigh while the other rested behind his head, watching me with hooded eyes.

I inhaled deeply and slowly started grinding my hips against him.

“Like this?” I asked breathlessly.

“Yes,” he rasped, his chest heaving with each movement.

The soft jingling of my bangles and the faint ringing of the bells on my ornate waistband filled the space, blending beautifully with our bodies' movements.

“Take off your clothes,” he commanded, his voice low and rough.

Shivering under his gaze, I brought my hands to the back of my blouse, untying the strings. Slowly, I slid the fabric off my shoulders, baring myself to him.

He inhaled sharply, eyes locked on my breasts, watching them move subtly with each grind of my hips.

Teasingly, I brushed a finger over my hardened nipple, making him bite his lower lip. His hand shot out, grabbing my breast and squeezing firmly, pulling a deep moan from my throat.

I moved to untie my skirt, lifting the hem, pulling it over my head, and discarding it to the side.

Now, completely naked and adorned only in jewellery, I straddled him.

His hand touched my neck, and my head fell back, eyes closed. I was even more aroused and was feeling immensely hot. He moved his other hand around my waist and helped me ride him faster, building a devastating rhythm.

I grabbed his wrist, guiding it towards my chest and moved my hand to undo my bun.

My long hair flowed down his thighs, and I pushed my hands against his midriff, bouncing gently. His parted lips and flushed cheeks told me how he liked it.

Suddenly, he sat up, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking it back gently, forcing me to meet his burning eyes.

I moaned, and my hands pressed against his thighs behind me for support as he kissed me deeply. I felt an intense wave of sensations building in my stomach.

“Keep going, Nandani... ahhhh,” he muttered against my lips, voice thick with pleasure.

“Yes…” I nodded, my body trembling with exhaustion but desperate for release.

“Yes, don't stop... please,” he begged breathlessly, making my heart race faster.

I clung to him, my core tightening, the knot in my stomach about to explode.

“Yesss, yesss... keep going... or I'll kill you if you stop,” he growled, his mouth grazing my ear. The words pushed me over the edge.

I climaxed with a loud moan, my body convulsing, but his hand in my hair kept me upright, guiding me to keep moving against him even as my strength waned.

“Aahh… yes, yes,” He kept groaning, and I could feel him growing even harder. His chest was heaving wildly.

He grabbed my neck with one hand, freezing me in place under his firm hold. My hips kept moving frantically, almost beyond my control. My fingers trembled, and my knees hurt.

“Yes, be a good girl. Keep going,” He grunted senselessly against me.

Suddenly, he crashed his lips onto mine, and I felt him grinding his hips against me, both of us moving in desperate unison.

Without warning, he grabbed my waist, lifted me off him, and released onto my dupatta.

He lay back, exhausted, on the carpet, and I collapsed beside him, both of us panting heavily.

Slowly, our breathing evened out. I opened my eyes and saw the first ray of sunlight land on his face, making him glow, mixing with the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

He looked at me and whispered, “I know you want me dead one day,”

I burst into laughter and grabbed the comforter to cover myself. “Get dressed,” I said, tossing his kurta at him.

He smiled lazily, watching me. I stood up and returned to my chamber.

“Nandani,” I heard him call behind me. I turned and found him following me, wearing nothing but my dupatta loosely wrapped around his waist.

“How dare you leave me alone like that?” he said, sounding like a sulking child before hugging me from behind.

“I am getting late, Rudra. I have to get ready,” I said, smiling as he rested his chin on my shoulder, shaking his head like a stubborn boy.

“For what?” he asked.

“For the coronation,” I answered.

He inhaled deeply. “Oh... yes,” he murmured, stepping back.

I turned to him and grinned. “Let's take a bath together,”

He smiled mischievously and immediately lifted me into his arms. “Why not,” he said, making me giggle as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

He carried me toward the bathing room, set me down, and tossed the comforter onto a table where the attendants collected clothes for washing. He removed the dupatta from his waist and took my hand as we entered the pool.

He made me sit on his lap, the cool water sending shivers through my body. He touched my waist, making me giggle.

“Rudra,” I said with a laugh.

He leaned in to kiss my neck, and I gasped, smiling as I leaned against his chest. He gently brushed my hair aside, his lips trailing along my neck.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked softly, his fingers combing through my hair.

“I bet you couldn't help it,” I teased.

He chuckled. “You know me too well,” he said.

I looked at him from the corner of my eye as he held my hand. “Can I ask you something, Nandani?”

“Of course,” I replied.

He leaned closer and kissed my cheek gently. “Why did you learn seduction?”

I smiled. “For you,” I answered honestly.

I felt him smile against me as he asked, “Why for me? You're beautiful, lovely, and charismatic. You have a natural energy, a magnetic aura, and a spirit anyone could fall for. Why learn seduction?”

I smiled at his question and lowered my gaze, holding his hand tightly. “Do you know Suman?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, your maid,”

I shook my head. “No, she’s my best friend,”

“Oh,” he said, surprised.

“Four years ago, she was married off to a man,” I began, watching our fingers gently intertwine.

“And?” he prompted.

“She went through a hard time understanding her husband. He would come late at night, have sex with her, and then leave in the morning. Their only communication was physical. She couldn't satisfy him, and he didn’t care to understand her. We're lucky, Rudra. We have love,”

I took a deep breath and continued, “But not everyone marries for love. Sometimes it's for status, money, alliances or mere survival. And when that happens, the first thing that binds them is physical intimacy. No man waits months to touch his wife. He wouldn't wait to understand her mentally, emotionally, or spiritually before getting physical with her. That is the harsh truth of relationships in this society, Rudra. When two people are tied together, whether in a wedding, a love affair, or similar relationships, they first explore their physicality. But most young and inexperienced women don’t even understand their own needs. They aren't taught. They aren’t encouraged to talk. Even between couples, physical needs remain unspoken,”

He listened intently as I went on, “Suman lived in a joint family. They barely spoke, but there was constant pressure for a child. They only connected physically, and when even that failed, their relationship crumbled. The man found chemistry elsewhere... and eventually, their relationship came to an end,”

“He cheated on her,” Rudra said, anger flashing in his eyes.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“And it wasn’t her fault,” he added firmly.

“Exactly,” I nodded.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he said.

I shook my head slowly.

“It does, Rudra, it truly does. Thousands of women suffer because they don't understand or voice their needs. Meanwhile, men—more vocal, more confident—show their needs openly. It is visible on their faces. Meanwhile, women are taught to hide, to stay modest, to remain ignorant. But that ignorance creates loneliness, dissatisfaction, and emotional wounds,” I paused, squeezing his hand.

“It’s unrealistic to pretend that love alone sustains a marriage. Without satisfaction—physical, emotional, mental—a relationship suffocates. Our instincts are natural, Rudra. They're survival. And when intimacy lacks understanding or pleasure, it becomes traumatic,”

“I learned seduction to give you everything, Rudra,” I whispered. “Everything. So that you would never feel incomplete or unloved, just like feeding healthy food to a hungry body, I wanted to nourish your heart, body, and soul. That is how it should be. But Suman didn't know about it, and her marriage broke because of it and thousands of relationships struggle for the same reason,”

He looked at me deeply, his brows drawn together. “But not everyone sees it your way. Some would call you shameless, immoral,” he said thoughtfully.

I nodded. “Yes, that's the tragedy. We live in a world where brothels thrive, but wives suffer in silence. Where a man’s infidelity is forgiven or even praised, while a woman must bear humiliation with a stiff smile, society won't change overnight, Rudra. But I can choose. I chose to love you completely, without shame,”

“That is so deep for a girl like you, Nandani,” he said, and I gulped softly.

“When I saw Suman crying because of it, I questioned myself,” I began. “It was her husband's fault that he cheated on her. But a part of me always believed it was our society’s fault, for not preparing Suman for what marriage truly demands. They speak so sweetly about marriage, like it's a fairy tale where two people live happily ever after, but they never discuss the real source of that happiness.

When two people come together, physical attraction is often the first bond. Emotional, mental, and spiritual connections come much later, often after conflicts arise.

Thousands of relationships break early simply because people lack understanding, conversation, and education. Leave others, every man and woman must first understand themselves before stepping into a relationship. Know what needs you seek to fulfill. Ask yourself, do you even need a relationship? Where are your boundaries? What are your insecurities? What lines cannot be crossed, even for love?

Love isn’t just about surrendering completely and allowing the other to do anything in its name. Learning about seduction isn’t just about fulfilling needs; it’s about control, communication, and nurturing a relationship. Whether people agree or not, it does affect them.

Neither man nor woman should lose themselves so much in the name of love that they forget where their lines are.

Because emotional, mental, and spiritual health cannot exist without physical well-being. They say God resides inside you, so how can love come only from outside?”

“That's true,” he said, his voice soft with understanding.

I nodded. “Exactly. Love comes from within. Understanding your needs, your desires, your limits—it’s your responsibility first, before it becomes anyone else's,”

He smiled warmly and kissed my cheek. “I think I have an idea for you,” he said, making me frown slightly.

“For me? What?”

Still smiling, he said, “I completely agree with what you're saying. That’s why I want you to discuss this with the women of Suryagarh,”

My brows furrowed deeper. “Me? How could I? My parents don’t even know I learned all this,”

He kissed my cheek again. “You don’t have to do it personally. But you can lead it. We can bring in masters who can educate women about these things. We can't force them to listen, but taking a step is better than remaining silent,”

I smiled, biting my lower lip, thinking about it.

“See, that’s the true power of seduction,” I teased. “A man is a beast, and only an angel can tame him,”

He chuckled and kissed my forehead. “I love you even more, Nandani,”

I closed my eyes, and we kept talking while sitting in the water.

After our bath, we stepped out and walked into the dressing room, watching each other get ready. He picked a white kurta, and I chose the attire he had bought for me.

After dressing, I called him over to tie the knot of my blouse. He happily obliged.

He sat on the chair by the dressing table, wearing his kurta and dhoti, silently admiring me as I got ready. His lips curled into a playful smile, and his teasing began.

“I think sex suits you,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes while fixing my earring. “What do you mean?”

Clicking his tongue mischievously, he said, “You're gaining weight... and your breasts are getting bigger,”

His voice was so slow and teasing that I burst into laughter.

“How dare you! You didn't even notice if my hair’s gotten longer, but you’re worried about my breasts?”

He laughed, making animated hand gestures. “You know, earlier it was this," he said, mimicking a smaller size, “And now it’s this,” he teased, opening his hands wider.

I smacked his hand away, shaking my head. “You don't like it?” I asked, making a sad face.

Suddenly, he pulled me onto his lap, hugging me tightly.

“I love every inch of you, Nandani. Every inch,” he said sincerely.

I smiled, cupping his jaw and kissing his cheek. “And I love you so much,” I whispered, looking into his eyes.

“By the way, I have to ask you something,” I said shyly, feeling a blush creep over my cheeks as I lowered my gaze.

“Yes?” he asked curiously.

I fidgeted with my fingers. “Before our marriage... how did you imagine our first time would be?”

He suddenly burst into hearty laughter, and I immediately felt embarrassed.

“You can't laugh like that!” I whined, trying to get up. But he tightened his arms around me, still laughing, and hugged me closer.

“Stop!” I said, half-laughing myself.

Eventually, his laughter died down, and he looked at me, his eyes warm and teasing. “You really want to know?”

I nodded eagerly.

“Please,” I said softly, “I want to do something special for you after your crowning ceremony.”

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

I smiled, looking at her glowing face. “You are already special to me, Nandani,” I tried to say.

She immediately rolled her eyes. “Irrelevant answer,” she said, and I chuckled, scratching the back of my neck. Honestly, I didn’t know how to answer her. I had never imagined her in that way before our marriage. Never had I thought we would come this far.

“Leave it,” she said with a sigh. “I'll figure it out myself,”

I smiled at her just as a voice interrupted us. “Ranaji,” An attendant called from outside.

I turned towards the door. “Ji?” I asked, smiling at her.

“Badi Maasa is asking you to hurry for the ceremony,” she informed respectfully.

I nodded. “Okay, we're coming,” I said, and she left.

Turning back, I saw Nandani hurriedly putting on her jewellery, her fingers moving quickly, slightly fumbling. Watching her like that, so real, so close, made my heart thud harder. I couldn’t believe how far we had come. Marriage, love, this moment... none of it had ever seemed possible.

“Rudra,” she called, and hearing my name on her lips made a wide smile break across my face. Oofff, how beautiful she sounded.

“Hnn-hnn,” I hummed, just staring at her, lost.

She turned to look at me, a loose strand of hair falling across her cheek. My heart tightened instantly. How dare even a strand of hair touch her so boldly? She was flawless. She was everything.

“Can you help me change my anklets? They're heavy and I can't bend forward,” she said without looking at me.

“Of course,” the words slipped out before I could think.

I stood up and gently pushed her to sit down. She held the anklets in her hands, and I knelt before her. Carefully, I lifted her feet onto my knees.

“You’re wearing white. It’ll get stained,” she warned, glancing at me. “I just put Mahavar[46],”

I smiled mischievously and, instead of pulling back, grabbed the arms of her chair and dragged her even closer. She frowned in confusion as I pressed her feet against my chest, staining my kurta with the bright red imprint of her mahavar.

“Are you mad?!” she gasped, pulling her feet away quickly.

I chuckled, still staring at the red marks on my chest. “With my heart already stained by you, what else do I need?”

“You’re stupid!” she scolded, half-frustrated, half-amused.

I grinned and gently placed her feet back on my knees, unhooking the heavy anklets carefully with my teeth. She giggled at the gesture.

“Honestly,” she said between her laughter, “I didn’t know you could be this romantic,”

“Neither did I,” I admitted, smiling.

She leaned forward a little, helping tighten the hook of her new anklets. Her cheeks flushed a beautiful shade of pink. She playfully tapped my cheek with her foot, making me laugh quietly.

I took her other ankle and repeated the process.

“You should change your kurta,” she said, noticing the red stains. “It won't look good if you roam around the palace with your wife's Mahavar imprinted on you,”

I chuckled and nodded, pretending to agree, though I had no intention of removing it.

Just then, another knock came at the door. “Ranisa,” an attendant called.

“Yes?” Nandani answered.

“Ranisa, your family has arrived,” the attendant informed.

She immediately stood up from the chair, her face lighting up with pure excitement. “Really?!” she exclaimed, looking at me with sparkling eyes. “Rudra, Maasa and Baapusa are here!”

I smiled at her wide, innocent happiness and nodded.

She laughed joyfully and rushed out of the room. I glanced at the mirror one last time, my eyes falling on the bright red imprint on my chest. I smiled. It looked... perfect.

I followed her out and quickly checked the arrangements in the guest chambers. This was her family’s first visit to Suryagarh, and I wanted everything to be perfect—no complaints.

After a few moments of briefing the staff, I walked toward the main entrance.

There, my sight fell on Nandani, hugging her mother tightly, her face glowing with love and emotion. I smiled warmly at the sight.

“There he is,” her father’s voice said faintly.

Everyone—Nandani, Ranvijay, Agastya—turned toward me. Their expressions shifted into surprise.

I walked forward and stood beside Nandani, joining my hands respectfully.

“Pranam, Rajaji,” I said.

Her father chuckled, and I smiled as I bent forward to touch his feet, but he stopped me midway, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“We should hug Rana Rudra Dev Singh,” he said with pride shining in his eyes, pulling me into a firm hug. I returned it with warmth.

I then touched Daadisa's feet. She smiled, blessing me with a hand on my head.

“God bless you, Rudra,” she said, and I smiled as she made a gesture of warding off evil.

“Last time you forgot to give me that thing, you know?” she started. “I’ve been feeling a lot of pain in my body. Can you show me Ra—”

“Daadisaaaa!” Nandani interrupted loudly, rushing to hug her grandmother, cutting her off.

“I missed you so much, Daadisa,” she cried feigningly, pressing her face against her shoulder.

Everyone stared at her in confusion, and I laughed. “She’s lying,” I teased. I bent to touch her mother's feet, receiving her blessings warmly. Next, I spotted Abhinandan standing beside his father.

“Abhi!” I called out excitedly, moving toward him.

We spread our arms for a hug, and he muttered loudly enough for me to hear, ***“Kya kya din dekhne pad rahein hain,”*** (What days I’m seeing now).

I laughed and said, “Shut up!”

He rolled his eyes but smiled.

He then glared at my kurta, spotting the bright red stain. “Don’t you feel any shame?”

I chuckled. “She is my pride. I will proudly carry my pride with me,”

He clicked his tongue in mock disgust. “Ugghh!!” he grunted, making me laugh harder.

“You all should rest,” I said. “The chambers are ready,”

They nodded and moved toward the palace.

Just then, I felt a small tug on my arm and turned to find a frustrated Nandani.

“What the hell? I told you to change it. Everyone saw it. You shouldn't have done that,” Her frustration made me smile, and she gritted her teeth. “I’m not joking,” she snapped.

“Nandani,” Suddenly, her mother called her, and she looked away from me.

“Ji, Maasa, I’m coming,” she answered, giving me one last serious look before ordering sternly, “Change it now,”

I shook my head with a smirk. “No, I won't,”

Her eyes widened in anger. “Then I’ll do it myself,” she threatened.

I chuckled under my breath and muttered, “Gladly, my angry little wife,” She sighed, exasperated.

“Nandani,” her mother called again.

“Coming, Maasa,” she replied quickly. Before leaving, she warned me sharply, “If you don't change it, Rudra, I will never talk to you again,”

I smiled at her angry voice and deeply breathed as I watched her walk away.

But I didn’t change it. I didn’t want to. It was simple; I felt proud wearing it.

As she disappeared down the hall, I noticed Ranvijay and Agastya staring at me like owls. “What are you looking at?” I asked.

They spoke in unison, “What the hell happened to you?” I chuckled and walked away, ignoring them to check the rest of the preparations.

The morning passed as we completed all the arrangements. Later, they summoned me to the sacred Hawan[47] to pray before the crowning ceremony.

I spotted Nandani waiting for me. As soon as she saw me, she sighed in apparent frustration. I walked closer, and she looked at my kurta with an angry pout.

“I told you to change,” she said as I held her hand, leading her towards the hawan kund.

“I don't want to,” I said lightly.

She carefully climbed the stairs beside me, whispering fiercely, “I won't talk to you after this. Everyone is watching. What will they think of us?”

I smiled and helped her sit in front of the sacred fire. “We’ll see,” I said and joined my hands in prayer.

I noticed the priest and several others stealing glances at the imprint on my chest. Nandani quickly pulled her veil lower to hide her face. I laughed under my breath, and we focused on the rituals.

Once the ceremony ended, Badimaa approached us, holding the prestigious ancestral swords. I knelt and respectfully took the sword from her, touching her feet for blessings.

“May you become the mightiest and strongest King history will ever remember,” she said.

I turned to see Nandani, who stepped forward shyly. Badimaa smiled warmly and handed her the heavy bunch of the palace’s keys. Nandani touched them to her forehead and bent down to seek blessings.

“May you become the most renowned queen in history,” Badimaa blessed her.

I smiled, seeing the light blush on Nandani’s cheeks. We went on to greet all the elders and accept their blessings.

The celebration began, and loud sounds of trumpets and drums filled the air as the crowd cheered for us. I spotted Agastya dancing shamelessly among the crowd, laughing, enjoying himself with everyone.

I looked at Nandani, who still refused to talk to me. “Hey,” I tried softly once we sat on the royal couch.

She didn't even glance my way. I smiled, amused by her tantrums.

Gifts were poured in one after another by rulers across the northern region.

The feast soon started, and as tradition demanded, men and women dined separately. The whole of Suryagarh was invited for dinner, a perfect opportunity to win their hearts.

I sat among our people, Ranvijay, Agastya, her father, brother, and all the officials. Everyone noticed the bright red imprint on my chest, but no one said anything aloud.

The day ended long after nightfall. Some guests departed, while others stayed back.

After bidding everyone goodnight and checking the preparations for the morning, I finally made my way to my chamber.

The chamber was beautifully lit, filled with the fragrance of roses and lavender.

As I stepped in, I noticed the attendants leaving after setting everything up. Looking around, I couldn't spot Nandani.

I asked an attendant, “Where is Ranisa?”

She bowed slightly. “I’m sorry, Ranaji. I do not know,”

“Please find her and ask her to meet me,” I said, and she nodded before hurrying off.

Feeling drained, I sank onto the couch, waiting. Minutes turned into an hour. The milk placed for us went cold—still no sign of her.

Anger and worry boiled inside me. Where was she?

I left the chamber and began searching. The palace corridors were silent and deserted at this hour.

I searched everywhere, the library, the bathing area, the gardens, but no sign of her. My heart hammered as I turned toward the kitchens, the last place I hadn’t checked.

As I approached, faint laughter echoed through the halls.

What the hell?

There she was. Standing with Agastya, stirring something in a pan over the stove, smiling brightly.

My brows furrowed tightly. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” I asked sharply, my voice louder than I intended.

“Bhaisa,” Agastya chuckled carelessly.

I glared at Nandani, who continued stirring calmly, acting unfazed by my arrival.

“Nothing. Just spending some quality time,” she said with a stiff smile that hit harder than any slap.

I felt a tightness in my chest at her casual tone.

“But isn't it very late?” I tried to reason as I stepped closer.

She turned, grabbed a cloth, and moved the hot pan off the stove. “Devarsa, it’s ready,” she said sweetly, her anklet bells tinkling with each graceful step.

She walked deeper into the kitchen, grabbing a bowl to serve whatever she had cooked.

Seeing her in the red attire, adorned in heavy jewellery, and that radiant smile left me momentarily speechless. Despite the exhausting day, she looked breathtaking.

She lowered her gaze and gently started filling the bowl with the sweet dish she had made. And I glanced at Agastya, who waited patiently.

“Here it is,” she said, handing the bowl to him with a smile.

“Thank you so much, Bhabhisa,” Agastya took it with a grin, casting me a victorious look, and walked past me.

“Good night, Bhaisa,” he added, clearly teasing.

I couldn't help but smile, scratching my eyebrow a little. “Good night, Agastya,” I replied.

After watching him disappear down the corridor, I turned my gaze back to Nandani, who was quietly watching me.

I inhaled a deep breath and stepped closer. Her gaze dropped timidly to my kurta, and I couldn't resist asking, “Are you still angry with me, little bird?”

She didn't answer. Unable to hold back, I picked her up in my arms, and she gasped at the sudden move, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck. “Everyone saw you wearing this kurta today,” she hissed.

As I carried her back towards our chamber, I met her eyes. “It's good, isn't it?” I said with a smile. “Everyone knows now that I belong to you. That I'm your pet,”

She leaned her forehead against my chest and shook her head. “I didn't want that, Rudra. I didn't want to give such a message. A king shouldn't show weakness. There were rulers from nearly every northern kingdom today, and they saw you like this. It wasn't right. A king is the head, the leader, the lion of the kingdom... and you made them see your weakness,”

Sadness filled her voice, and I chuckled, climbing the steps toward our chamber. “You can only ever be my strength, Nandani,” I said. “They know that because of you, I conquered this kingdom. And now they know that, on your command, even a lion can tear his enemies apart,”

I entered our bedchamber, and my steps froze. Candles flickered in the chandeliers and candle stands. Flowers decorated every corner, filling the room with the fragrance of roses and lavender. And a wide smile broke across my face.

“You did this?” I asked, looking at her. She nodded.

“No matter how angry I was,” she said softly, “I couldn't let this special night go to waste,”

I gently set her down and let my eyes roam around, taking in every detail of the decorations. The bed looked as if it had been prepared for the grandest nights.

“Feels like a wedding night preparation,” I teased.

She chuckled. “That’s a one-time thing. And we both were too angry on our wedding night to even think about anything like this,”

Smiling, she stepped closer, and taking my hand, led me to the couch, pressing her palms against my chest, pushing me down.

I lost balance and fell with a thud, laughing under my breath. She knelt before me, her anklets chiming softly.

“What are y—”

“Shhhhh,” she hushed me with a finger against my lips.

I watched her pull out a black thread from her small bag, her kohl-lined eyes flickering with a mysterious glow. She gently lifted my sleeve and tied the thread around my wrist, her fingers moving slowly, carefully.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from her. She blushed so deeply that her cheeks turned a fiery red.

Once she tied the knot, she stood up gracefully. The jingling of her jewellery echoed in the quiet room.

With a soft smile, she clapped her hands twice, and two attendants entered—one carrying a burning ash pot, the other a plate.

I shook my head, smiling even wider. “There’s no ne—”

“Shhhh,” she hushed again.

She picked up a few dry red chillies and circled them around me, muttering some verses under her breath. Her bangles danced on her wrists as she repeated the ritual several times before dropping the chillies into the ash pot.

The crackling sounds filled the chamber as smoke curled into the air, and the attendants quietly slipped out, leaving us alone.

I watched Nandani wash her hands nearby. When she turned to me again, my heart skipped a beat.

What else could I ask for?

She sauntered toward me, smiling sweetly, her dupatta slipping off her head to reveal jasmine flowers tied in her bun.

The deep vermilion on her hair parting shone proudly, and a sense of pride and love surged inside me.

She came closer, circling me slightly before gently settling onto my lap. My hands instinctively wrapped around her to steady her.

She leaned in, clutching the hem of my kurta at the neck, her lashes lowered to my lips, then back to my neck, her breath brushing against my skin. And before I could comprehend anything, with one quick move, she tore my kurta into two pieces.

“You are never wearing it again,” she whispered fiercely.

I blinked, stunned, and instantly aroused by the fire in her voice. “Okay, Nandani,” I managed to say hoarsely.

She smiled and brought her hands to her nose ring, carefully removing it. Her cheeks burned in the bright shade of pink as she cupped my face between her hands. She dropped her gaze to my lips, and before I could even breathe, she kissed me.

Our lips collided softly, breathing quickened, our noses brushing against each other, and her hands tightened around my neck as she deepened the kiss, sucking my lips.

She tilted her head, taking my lower lip into her mouth, and I moaned softly.

She moaned into my mouth when I took the lead, holding her nape, pulling her closer. I felt her heart pounding in her chest when she pressed her lips harder against mine until she suddenly pulled back, leaving me desperate for more.

I tried to kiss her again, but she pressed a finger against my lips. “Calm down, Ranaji,” she whispered.

Her words made my entire being ache for her even more. She leaned into my neck, her lips hot and trembling against my skin.

I tilted my head back against the couch as she placed her mouth at the base of my neck, kissing first gently, then with growing hunger.

I bit my lower lip, trying to control the waves of pleasure flooding through me.

When her teeth grazed my skin, I hissed in pain and delight.

“Shhh,” I hissed. She flicked her little tongue out, soothing the bite by pressing her lips gently, sucking lightly at the spot, easing the sting into a delicious ache.

In no time, I felt myself turning hard. Her kisses trailed down my chest and abs, and she slid off my lap to sit between my legs, her lips pressing burning trails on my stomach. My hand remained tangled gently at the back of her head.

Slowly, holding my gaze, she knelt before me with a smile.

I shook my head slightly with a thrumming heart, but she leaned in, pressing her lips on my waistline. My breathing turned heavy when she cupped my manhood through the fabric.

“No, little love, your place is here,” I said, pointing at my heart.

She smirked in response and lowered her gaze to the knot of my lower.

I immediately leaned forward to her and kissed her forehead gently with my lips.

“Nandani, please,”

She looked into my eyes and shook her head. “Do me as an enslaved person for tonight, Rudra. I want it,”

I tipped forward and placed my hand on her cheek. “You are my queen,” I reminded her. However, she untied the knot.

“Not tonight, Ranaji,”

I closed my eyes, our foreheads against each other for a moment, when she suddenly pushed me back by my chest against the couch.

I clamped onto the armrest tightly, breathless, when she slid the fabric low, revealing myself to her. She slowly enclosed her hands around my erection, making me arch my head back. I closed my eyes, feeling heat seep through every inch of my body in her hold.

“No,” she said, her voice slow. “Look at me when I am doing it to you, Ranaji,”

A wide smile spread across my face. “You want me dead tonight, don’t you?” I asked, and she hummed the way I always did. “Hnnn-hnnn, big husband,”

My chest heaved as I straightened to look at her. Her tender touch and crimson flush betrayed her shyness, even as she made such a bold move.

With her free hand, she moved my hand from the couch to her neck. “Do me as a slave tonight, Rudra,” she said, making me clutch my palm around her neck. “Fuck me like you want, Ranaji,”

I leaned in and kissed her forehead. Once, twice and thrice, but I didn't have enough courage to see her doing that to me.

She giggled, pressing her palm against my chest to push me back. My heart raced seeing her holding my erection. Her palms felt so soft and warm, it sent chills down my spine.

With a desire so passionate in her eyes, she gave a timid smile and asked me slowly, “Do I lick it first?”

I bit my lower lip and nodded. “Hnnn-hnnn,” I hummed, feathering her cheeks with my thumb.

She crept closer and placed her lips on it for a moment. And my heart flipped at the sight, my eyes blinking rapidly as I felt a slight wave of sensation rush through my body.

She smiled and swished her tongue out, teasingly, to lick it.

My insides just churned, twisting hard.

Fuck!

I bit down on my lower lip, blinking rapidly as I felt the soft, wet warmth of her tongue brush against my skin. A shudder ran through me, the sensation so electrifying it felt like I could die from it. She giggled at my reaction, and I couldn't help but part my lips, my brows drawing together when she licked the tip of my erection, once, twice, then a third time.

Oh, my goodness.

My eyes rolled back, and my lashes fluttered closed, helpless against the overwhelming rush. I felt her hand gliding slowly along me, the soft clinking of her bangles filling the heavy silence and pushing me further toward the edge.

Clenching my free hand into a fist against the armrest, I let my head fall back slightly as a hot wave of sensation coursed through me. Then I felt her warm mouth slowly enveloping me.

I opened my eyes, breathless, watching through hooded lids as she wrapped her lips around me.

My brows furrowed, and a deep, shaky groan slipped from my lips.

She took an inch of me into her mouth, and I gently feathered my fingers across her cheek. My heart was pounding so wildly it almost hurt.

I watched as tears welled up in her eyes when she tried to take more of me in.

A soft smile curved my lips, and I blinked slowly when she choked slightly and pulled away, gasping for breath.

Her chest heaved with every heavy breath, and she lifted her tear-filled gaze to meet mine, a small, embarrassed smile playing on her lips.

“I didn't think it would be this difficult,” she whispered, her voice low and shaky.

Unable to resist her, I leaned in and captured her wet lips in a kiss.

Her breathing quickened instantly, and she moaned against my mouth as I deepened the kiss, moving over her with desperate passion.

She whimpered, pulling back sharply. Her hand pressed against my chest, pushing me back with a mix of breathless laughter and heat, “Kings don't make their slaves kiss them on the lips,”

She lowered her gaze back to the erection and stroked it gently. Inhaling deeply, she took it again in her mouth, her lips wide, sucking it slowly.

My eyes rolled back, and my head arched as a wave of pure pleasure coursed through me. Her mouth felt like heaven. So soft, warm, and wet. Slowly, an uncontrollable urge built inside me to push deeper.

My fingers trembled as I fought to keep control. “Look at me, Ranaji,” she whispered against me, and with effort, I opened my heavy eyes to meet hers.

My chest rose and fell in a frantic rhythm, my body shivering under the weight of the pleasure surging through me.

I felt her hand reach for mine, guiding it to her cheek until I cupped both sides of her face and held her tenderly.

She closed her eyes, and I shivered as she let go of me, her hands moving to rest lightly on my thighs.

A deep groan rumbled from my throat as my fingers unconsciously tightened around her cheeks and neck, grounding me through her.

My eyes shamelessly drank in the sight of her—the way she moved against me, the way she sucked me with slow, deliberate care, making me lose every ounce of restraint.

A loud moan tore from my lips, and I desperately tried to hold myself back.

Oh my God!

I could feel myself slipping out of control.

She was trembling beneath my hold, her breathing uneven, only pushing me further into madness.

“Aaarrghhh... you’re clearly not being a good wife,” I muttered, my lips trembling.

I didn’t want to take charge or force her, but she wasn’t helping either. She teased and tested the very edges of my restraint.

She couldn’t say a word, and I felt my arousal climb to an unbearable peak.

Biting my lip hard, I struggled to stay still, but my hands moved on their own. She grabbed my wrists and gently pulled my hands away from her face.

Immediately, I squeezed my fists against the couch, my entire body trembling with need.

Fuck.

My breathing grew ragged as I watched her slowly take me deeper. Her tearful eyes locked onto mine, making me feel more vulnerable, more desperate, and more consumed than ever.

“Please…” The word escaped my lips, begging her to move, to end this sweet torture.

It was unbearable.

She sucked even harder, and I lost it completely. “Aarrghhhhhhh,” I groaned loudly, my voice raw with sensation.

I blinked rapidly, barely able to focus, as I watched her pull away. I sat there stunned for a moment, unable to understand her next move.

I watched her, lost like a puppy, as she rose and took a few steps back.

“Now, help yourself like a good boy,” she said, taking her hand to the back of her neck.

In an urge, I held my erection and stroked it along the length.

Breathing in immense need and raw desire, I watched her like a madman as she removed her necklace and placed it on the table.

“You definitely don’t want to move for another week, Nandani,” I said.

She smiled. “We will see,” Her slow, seductive voice travelled down my ear.

She worked on taking off all her jewellery.

“Leave your anklets, bangles, toe rings and your hair untouched. Take off everything,” I immediately instructed, and she smiled.

“As you say, Ranaji,” she teased, doing what I said, while I brushed my palms against myself.

She pulled the strings off her blouse and slid it down her shoulders, exposing her breasts to my hungry eyes. Her little brown nipples stood erect.

I wanted to eat her raw.

She then worked on her skirt and pushed it low, standing in just her in-skirt. And she removed that too, making me lose my last ounce of sanity.

Looking at her completely naked form, I pulled my torn kurta, clinging to my arms and kicked my dhoti aside, pooled at my feet.

“Come here,” I said.

She slowly made her way to me, the tinkling of her anklets resonating in the chamber.

As she stood before me, I held her hand, pulling her closer and pressed my lips on her abdomen. Grabbing her calf, I pulled her leg up and placed it on the couch.

She breathlessly moved her fingers through my hair. I moved my lips further, earning a loud moan from her.

Her body trembled under my lips as I moved them hungrily on her skin.

I slowly pulled back, watching her in silence, aroused and all at my mercy, biting on my lip.

I rose, and she scanned me from head to toe. Holding my torn kurta, I moved closer to her and held her hands to tie them behind her.

She blinked nervously and felt her heart hammering in her chest against mine as I kissed the side of her neck.

Her head tilted to the side, while I tied both ends of the kurta around her wrists. As I tightened the knot, she shivered.

“Remember, ask me to stop when you want. Alright, little love?” I asked, and she gave a slight nod. “Words,” I demanded.

She nodded again. “Yes, Ranaji,” she rasped.

I moved behind her, the tension between us, not just romantic but of lust, pure desire for each other. As I cupped her nape, she gave in to my touch, angling her head back.

My fingers moved toward her hair, removing the jasmine flowers around her bun.

Her long, beautiful hair fell free on her hips, and I began braiding it so as not to hurt her later. Securing the end with the string of flowers, I moved it to her front and placed a deep, lingering kiss on the curve of her neck.

My hand made its way toward her tiny waist, and she leaned more into me, pressing her head against my chest.

She moaned helplessly as I drawled my fingers to her core, caressing it gently, her legs trembling at the touch.

I took a step back. “On your knees,” I commanded, and she blinked nervously, doing as I said.

I, too, knelt behind her and grabbed a pillow from the couch. She peeked at me slightly as I placed the pillow before her.

Smiling, I leaned closer to her and sucked on her earlobe, drawing a deep, throaty moan out of her.

“Place your knees on the pillow,” I said, and she slowly moved ahead, placing her knees on the pillow. I held her waist, hovering over her, and kissed her cheek.

“Ready?” I asked, and she mewled.

“Ahh, yes,”

I gently pushed her forward to balance herself over the couch, angling her hips for me.

With her hands tied around her back, struggling to steady herself, I looked at how she moaned feebly under me.

I placed my lips over her nape. Her breathing had quickened, and she visibly trembled at my kisses.

I kept sucking her skin, leaving a trail of wet, light kisses all over her back.

As I reached the side of her waist, I sucked her harshly. A wild, unrestrained energy surged through me, leaving bruises all over her waist with my mouth.

She pressed her face into the couch, moaning louder.

I traced my fingers down to her soft, thick thighs. She had put on a little weight, and the slight curve of her belly only made her more irresistible to me.

I gently parted her legs and held her by the waist, steadying myself. Straightening up, I stroked my arousal once before guiding it to her entrance. She flinched slightly at the contact, her tied hands shifting in response.

I heard her draw in a deep breath, and I leaned closer, whispering, “Calm down,”

A piercing moan left her mouth as I slowly pushed in.

Tightening my grip on her waist, I pushed deeper, sinking into her warmth completely, earning an even louder moan from her.

“Do you want everyone to hear your moans, Nandani?” I murmured, leaning in close to her nape.

Her body trembled beneath my hold, and I could feel myself pulsing wildly inside her, her tightness making it nearly impossible to stay in control.

“Yes,” she gasped. I pressed my lips to her neck, kissing her hungrily before sucking hard on her soft skin.

Her cry echoed through the room, loud and raw.

I pulled back, watching the deep red mark bloom on her skin. “Why?” I asked, my voice low as I straightened and gripped her waist firmly.

She swayed slightly, her breath shaky as she replied, “Because I want every woman in this palace to envy me,” A chuckle escaped me as I began to move slowly, my hips rolling with deliberate restraint. She trembled, her whole body reacting.

“My brothers too live here,” I said with a teasing edge.

Her moans grew louder as she shook and trembled beneath me, the soft clinking of her bangles and anklets matching the rhythm of our movements.

“They should learn something from you,” she whispered in a shaky voice. I smirked and quickened my pace.

Her moans spiralled into cries, her body arching. Soon, both of us were slick with sweat, our breathing erratic, and the rhythmic slap of our bodies meeting stirred something wild in me.

“Aahhh... ahhhh...” she gasped, her voice breaking as I held one hand to her shoulder and the other firm on her waist, thrusting deeper and faster. Her body writhed, and she dissolved into a moaning mess.

She released, and I slowed my movement, watching her as she collapsed forward, breathless. Her ink-stained hands clenched on the couch, trembling. I took a deep breath and reached down to untie the knot.

The moment her hands were free, she pressed one to the couch for support and lifted her flushed face. I cupped her neck, drawing her closer.

She moaned softly, her cheeks had turned crimson, and her breath was unsteady. I looked at her swollen lips, her closed eyes, her body shaking, still responding to every subtle movement.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and shoulders, settling back on my knees and holding her close. Gently guiding her, I let her move with me. She struggled slightly, but her body, still warm and eager, responded on its own.

Her breathing had grown erratic, wild and uneven. I moved my hand from her nape down to her chest, gently cupping her breast. And she let out a sharp moan.

“You look so damn hot, Nandani,” I murmured.

She opened her eyes, locking them with mine. Her lips were dry, and her hair a chaotic mess of desire.

“I’m all of this only for you, Ranaji,” she whispered in a trembling voice.

I turned her face gently and pressed my lips to hers. She moaned into my mouth as our kiss deepened, then I slowly pulled back.

I placed a firm hand on her shoulder and guided her down again. A heat surged through me; I was burning for her.

She gasped, digging her fingers into the couch. Her moans grew louder as I moved faster. Her body shook beneath me, completely overwhelmed, yet I couldn’t stop. Not until I finally gave in to the wave building inside me.

When it crashed over me, it was too intense to hold back. I collapsed over her back, both of us gasping for air.

She struggled to sit up, her fingers trembling. I could tell it had taken every ounce of her strength.

She looked at me with a tired yet radiant smile playing on her lips. “You’ve ruined every man, even the ones in my dreams,” she mumbled.

I chuckled, brushing the hair from her face. “You too, love. You too.”

I helped her sit back on the couch. She immediately lay down and closed her eyes, exhausted.

I lay on the floor, my hand reaching up to find hers dangling over the edge of the couch. I kissed her fingers gently and closed my eyes, trying to steady my breath.

“The night is still young,” I murmured.

She cracked her eyes open, meeting my gaze. “It is,” she whispered, a sleepy smile tugging at her lips.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Nandani

I was breathless as he hovered over me, his body claiming mine, our hands entwined above my head. My back arched in surrender, my strength long abandoned. I had lost count of my cries, my shudders, my releases, everything.

My body trembled beneath him like a frail thread unravelling, my senses reduced to a storm of sensations. His movements were relentless, sometimes slow, deliberate and deep, sometimes wild, overwhelming, until I gasped for breath. When he sank fully inside me, it felt like he was carving his place into my soul, and sometimes, tears would escape my eyes, unbidden, from the intensity of it all.

But there was no stopping.

That night, I understood the true meaning of his strength. He was not just a man. He was a force. And it didn't feel like I was being loved by one man, but by the unstoppable will of many. I was nothing in front of him; I was not weak, not lesser, and just entirely undone.

My hair was in disarray, my cheeks and chest flushed a deep crimson. My body burned — not from pain alone, but from the ecstasy of being wholly claimed by him. Everything else faded, only sensation remained, and the heat of his skin against mine, the thunder of our heartbeats colliding.

The air in the chamber thickened with our moans and groans. The sheets, the crushed flowers, the scattered petals, all bore witness to what passed between us. I felt the crushing weight of his body on me.

Still, he persisted until he poured his final breath of energy into me, until he collapsed with exhaustion, or until he felt satisfied.

That night, I saw a different Rudra. Not the man I had always known — but the king. The warrior, like a storm, a man greater than life. His eyes had no regrets, no hesitation.

Yet I saw the fury of ten years of restraint break apart before me. I saw him fall apart. I saw him sweat and tremble. I saw him roll his eyes, writhing in pleasure. I saw his tangled, messy hair. I saw him shaking, desperate for release.

I wouldn't tone down the true experience. It was not tender; it wasn't easy, and it hurt and shook me at times. But it was real, something painfully, gloriously beautiful.

Satisfying a man's hunger in this way felt like an experience beyond this world. The pleasure was doubled when it was with the man who was not only your lover but also your husband, your everything.

It was a night that shattered every expectation, every boundary, every ounce of courage I thought I had. I felt him unravelling, losing himself in the moment.

When he grew restless with being over me, he would pull away, shift his weight to his knees, and, with a forceful grip on my ankles, flip me over onto my stomach. I could feel the warmth of the bed against my skin as he entered me from behind.

My fingers clenched the sheets, my face buried in the crushed flowers, my eyes clenched shut. Each thrust, deep and relentless, drove me further into submission. His hands pressed into the mattress as his hips ground against mine torturously.

As the night wore on, each moment seemed to stretch further, his movements becoming wilder, more frantic. The need in him had become almost painful, and with every release, I could feel his control slipping further.

I lost count of the positions he tried. One moment, I was beneath him, the next, I was above him, then on all fours, bouncing against his fierce thrusts. Sometimes I was in his lap, his fingers threading through my hair, pulling at the loose strands of my braid, other moments when I struggled for my release, my body pressing into his, legs tightly wound around his waist, my hands clutching his shoulders, our lips, locked in a heated breath.

He moved like a beast, not a wild, animalistic force, but a powerful, controlled presence—a beast of desire, of strength, of unrelenting hunger.

Through it all, his hand never touched my neck, never restrained me. He let me fall apart beneath him. He let me become a trembling, moaning mess, senseless and out of control. His hips were grinding relentlessly. My hands fisted the sheets, my breasts bouncing with every movement, my back arching against the softness of the flowers and the bed beneath us.

The air was thick with the scent of roses, lavender, and our sweat, an intoxicating mix that filled the room. We did not sleep. He didn’t let me sleep, not until the first light of dawn crept into the room, and even then, he gave one final, deep, intense release—his third, while I had no idea how many I had reached.

He had drained all my strength, all my energy, which I had carried for twenty-two years. All of it vanished in that single, intense night. I was sure I had lost weight, not from hunger, but from the sheer physical exertion, the stretching, the relentless pace of our bodies moving against each other.

We had gone beyond what we knew, beyond any sense of shame. Every wall between us had crumbled. Every secret, every trace of hesitation, had vanished.

He collapsed beside me, exhausted, his body heavy against the bed. I was already lying there, frozen, unable to move. My legs ached, my knees shaking, not in pleasure, but in raw exhaustion. I could barely lift my body. I remember closing my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

When we finally fell asleep, it was well into the morning. We were tangled together, naked and spent. For the next day and night, no one disturbed us. We slept deeply, recovering. His arm draped around me, my head resting on his chest. We didn't talk. We were too tired, utterly drained.

Even changing position was an effort. My body ached, sore from the intensity, and though I was hungry, I couldn't find the strength to ask for food. All I wanted was sleep.

“Nandani,” I heard his low, caring voice, followed by the warmth of his arm wrapping gently around me.

We were both under the covers, and I lazily responded. “Hn?” I felt the weight of his chest against my back as he pulled me closer, inhaling deeply.

“Get up, love. You have to eat,” His voice was husky, and I groaned softly, my body still heavy with exhaustion.

“I’m tired... I just want to sleep,” I could barely stay awake, my body feeling light and chilled, as if floating in another dimension.

I felt him place a soft kiss on the back of my head, his warmth retreating as he shifted away. Within seconds, I was asleep again.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

“Nandani,” a gentle call pulled me from my sleep again.

I opened my eyes slowly, blinking against the light. Rudra was sitting beside me on the edge of the bed, a plate of food in his hand. He slid a strand of hair from my face, and I stretched lazily, my body still aching.

“I hate you,” I muttered, too tired to form anything else.

He chuckled lightly, his thumb brushing my chin as he asked, “Why so, love?”

I pulled the comforter up over my face, hiding my tired expression. “You... you fucked me so badly, Rudra,” I mumbled from underneath it, and I heard his light chuckle again, this time softer.

He gently pulled the comforter away, and I met his eyes, tired but still full of a mix of emotions. I noticed the broken bangles on my wrist, half of them shattered.

“Come here, love,” His voice was soft but insistent, and he helped me sit up slowly. A painful cry escaped me as my spine straightened and a dull ache coursed through my body.

“I hate you,” I cursed, pressing my hands to my chest to keep the comforter in place. My lips were dry, the remnants of sleep and the night still lingering. I looked at him. He was wearing white, his hair damp as if he had just showered. I could feel the hours passing; we’d slept the entire day.

He leaned closer, but I instinctively pulled back. “I’m dirty, Rudra,” I whispered, embarrassed.

He smiled, cupping my jaw gently before kissing me softly. “Dirty or clean, beautiful or ugly, well or sick, you’re mine. My little wife, my little bird,” he said softly.

I lowered my gaze, suddenly feeling timid under the weight of the night’s memories. I didn’t know how many ways he had seen me, how many layers had been stripped away. I face-palmed myself, letting out a soft sigh.

I was so loud. Too loud. I wondered if the whole kingdom had heard.

He shifted behind me, pressing his chest against my back. I felt a sense of peace wash over me as he wrapped his arms around me and held the plate of food before me. I pulled my knees up, fingers absentmindedly tracing the blanket's edges.

He kissed my bare shoulder, and I felt him feed me silently with his hands. After I finished eating, he helped me drink some water.

"Thank you," I muttered softly, looking over my shoulder. "Have you eaten?"

He smiled slightly, nodding as he placed the empty plate aside. "Yes,"

I leaned back against him, his chin resting on my head, his fingers tracing lightly over my arms. It felt so beautiful, so peaceful.

"Are you hurt, little bird?" His voice was soft, and I inhaled a shaky breath. I nodded gently, my fingers brushing his wrist in reassurance.

I felt him carefully remove the remaining bangles from my wrist. I also noticed he had already gathered the broken fragments from the bed. His touch moved to my tangled braid, working through the knots with patience, making my eyelids heavy.

I was slipping back into sleep, his fingers weaving through my hair, soothing me.

It took an entire week for my body to recover. The ache in my knees lasted, and the pain in my bones lingered, but the soreness in my core was the worst. Even the touch of the cloth felt like a burn. It took days to heal, and the sting when I urinated made me wince, sometimes bringing me to tears.

But slowly, it passed.

Rudra took care of me the whole time. I could see the subtle guilt in his eyes, but I felt none. I was proud of what we shared, happy that I had given him something no one else could.

He didn't touch me again for the next fifteen days, but the days we spent together were peaceful, filled with love. In the day, for the world, we were Ranaji and Ranisa, but in the night, we were Rudra-Nandani, two people who burned for each other, who were the fuel and fire for one another, who were each other's world.

Things in the kingdom began to settle, and peace treaties were gradually established.

I tried to talk to him about his Maasimaa, and after four months, he finally told me.

"What happened to her?" I asked, my curiosity growing.

He looked at me, irritated. "You don't want to know, Nandani,"

"I do," I insisted.

He exhaled in frustration and lay back on the couch, his head resting in my lap. His fingers intertwined with mine over his chest. The size of the couch made him look cramped, and his legs hung off the edge.

He closed his eyes for a moment before speaking, "She killed herself,"

I froze, shocked. “What?”

He opened his eyes, looking at me with pain. “It was ugly,”

I was stunned. “What do you mean?” I asked.

He inhaled deeply, his gaze lowering to somewhere beyond me, and then he began.

“The one who opened the doors to the ninth chamber for Surgami Dev Singh was her. She ran away after that, and it took a month for our soldiers to find her. When they did, they brought her to me. I tried to make her see the gravity of what she’d done. She wouldn’t listen. She said that you were the reason I changed. She hated you and even me. I wanted to forgive her. After all, she was like a second mother to me. But she asked me to choose between her and you. It tore me apart, Nandani. I never wanted to be in that position. But I chose you. I chose my future. I chose our life together,”

He paused, his gaze distant. “I know it was selfish. I felt guilty for abandoning my past, but the moment I came back from that river, I was a different man. I couldn’t live in two worlds anymore. I was ready to forgive her, but she couldn’t let go of her hate for you. And for me. She never forgave me, and I had no choice but to keep her under watch. Three months ago... she killed herself,”

“And you didn’t even tell me,” I said, anger bubbling in me.

He sighed and sat up, his posture tired. “Because the fire wasn’t yours to handle,” he said quietly. I felt a tight knot in my chest.

“But I didn’t want her dead. Yes, it was my burden, but I could have talked to her. She was important to you. She was someone in my life, too, even if only as a negative figure. Still, she meant something,” I said, my voice soft but laced with anger.

He stared at me, his frustration thickening the air between us. “What could you have said to her? She made me choose between you and her. She wasn’t sorry for a damn thing she did. She flooded our minds with hate. She ruined the lives of three kids,” he spat, his words heavy with resentment.

I clenched my fists, trying to control my rising anger. “The hate she built was the very fire that forged you, Rudra. It made you who you are today. God knows where you'd be if she hadn’t given you that reason to live,”

“I didn’t want that reason!” he thundered, standing up abruptly. “I never wanted that fire. If I’d known my father was such a bastard, I would’ve killed myself before becoming the man I am. I didn’t want that life, not the struggles, but the title. I didn’t want that hate. If I could, I would’ve erased it all, disappeared, and never been known as the son of Surya Dev Singh,”

His voice trembled with raw pain, but I pushed forward. “But she deserved something better from you, Rudra. Despite everything, she raised you. She fought for you and your brothers. And you, you just let her die like that, alone,”

He glared at me. “And now you’re taking her side?”

“No,” I snapped, “I’m taking the side of a woman who gave her everything to you. A woman who, yes, made mistakes, but who raised you and protected you, sleeping with, god knows, how many men. Who fought for your survival, for all of you,” my voice cracked as I spoke.

His nostrils flared as he stepped closer. “She played with my life, of three innocent kids’ lives, using them for twenty years. We were just a pawn, even so, I was ready to give her everything,” His words were sharp, cutting through the air.

“You should’ve told me, Rudra,” I said, my voice quieter but filled with intensity.

“No,” he retorted sharply, “This was my battle to fight. She messed with my life, and I had to make a choice. I couldn’t let anyone else in,”

“And I am your damn wife, Rudra! Not just a wife, but the Queen of this kingdom. You think I didn’t need to know?” My voice rose, a battle of wills escalating between us.

His expression hardened. “Yes, you are the queen, but this was mine to handle. You’ve always hated her, so why act like you care now?”

I recoiled, my heart pounding. “Yes, I hated her. But that doesn’t mean I wanted her dead. She killed herself, and you did nothing to stop it. For god’s sake, she was the woman who raised you. Where was your gratitude? She might have hurt us, but she didn’t deserve to die like that,”

The room fell silent, his anger simmering as I watched him, waiting for his response. But instead of words, he stood up abruptly, his expression hardening. “It feels like I’m talking to a bipolar right now,” he muttered, his tone venomous.

“Bipolar!” I shouted, unable to hold back the surge of anger. “You just called me bipolar?” I was shaking with fury.

He ran his fingers through his hair, pacing toward the door.

“Don’t walk away from me like this!” I screamed after him, but he didn’t stop. He didn’t even look back.

Frustrated, I grabbed the nearest pillow and hurled it at him, watching as he turned just in time to avoid it. He stared at me, teeth gritted, his jaw tightening with rage.

I felt a storm of emotions brewing inside me as he turned and walked out, his footsteps echoing in the hallway. I was left standing there, seething, my thoughts a whirlwind.

“What the hell?” I whispered to myself, feeling my heart race as I struggled to understand. How could he just walk away like that? Was it so hard to talk to me, to let me in?

I flopped onto the bed in frustration, my mind whirling. My father was a king and used to share everything with my mother. They were partners, never keeping secrets, always united. And here I was, married to a man who couldn’t even talk to me, who couldn’t see me as an equal.

My heart pounded wildly with anger. I wanted to kill him. I kept thinking—should I use a dagger or a sword?

I could have accepted anything, but not this for Chandramukhi. That woman had only ever suffered. Yes, her ways were wrong with my father and mother, but when it came to Rudra and his brothers, she had done everything for them when they needed her most. And yet, he hadn’t even tried to talk to her, to sort things out.

I didn’t know why, but it was haunting me. Being a woman, I could understand possessiveness, discomfort, and all the thousand little mistakes we make in the name of care and love. They aren't always right, but they come from a place of love. And she cared for them.

I lifted my head and stared at the door, waiting for him to return.

But as the minutes passed, a strange calmness started invading my furious thoughts.

Was I wrong? Should I not have said those things? Was it even my place to speak about it?

I inhaled deeply and palmed my face. My racing heart began to settle, and my mind drifted to sleep.

When I woke up with a jerk, my first instinct was to turn and look beside me. But the spot was untouched. Pain stabbed through me when I realised he hadn’t come back.

I lifted my gaze to the window, trying to see through the darkness. It was still a deep night, maybe just past midnight.

Throwing the comforter aside, I stepped down.

I would definitely kill him.

I walked out to the courtyard, but he wasn’t there either. Concern started clawing at my chest.

Where the hell did he go?

The sound of my anklets echoed loudly in the night's silence. I stepped out into the corridor, heading toward the stairs leading to the terrace.

My heart was pounding again, but this time from fear. I wasn’t fond of walking around at midnight, especially on a new-moon night, when everything felt heavier and darker. Clouds covered the sky, hiding even the stars.

The wide staircase was lit by wall-mounted lamps burning dimly on either side.

Suddenly, a heavy crash of thunder roared through the sky, and I jumped, shivering uncontrollably.

I would absolutely kill him for this.

Frightened to my core, I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, trying to gather courage. After what felt like endless steps, I finally reached the terrace.

The first thing my eyes caught was the thick, dark sky, blanketed in clouds.

“Rudra,” I called out, but my voice barely left my throat. The fear was overwhelming.

Suddenly, cold droplets tickled my arms and face, and I looked up at the sky, catching glimpses of tree-root-like lightning designs.

Another loud thunderclap sent my heartbeat racing beyond control, and I felt an overwhelming urge to run away.

But my heart told me he was here.

I inhaled a deep breath and tried to look around. It was dark; I could barely see anything. The only moments of visibility came when the lightning struck.

I stepped forward. It was a vast terrace bordered by high walls.

During wartime, soldiers would occupy the terrace. But right now, no one was here—our chamber was in the innermost part of the palace, the most secure area, and we were not at war.

Another flash of lightning, and I spotted a sleeping figure.

My throat dried up with fear, and I inhaled deeply, forcing myself to walk toward it. I could hear my wild heartbeat pounding in my ears.

“Rudra,” I called softly, but the figure didn’t move. “Rudra, you’re scaring me. Please,” I said, raising my voice slightly.

He shifted a little. “I don't want to talk,” he replied. Relief washed through me in a wave.

“Why?” I asked.

“My choice,” he said, turning slightly.

I gritted my teeth, blinking into the dark. “It’s pouring. You should come down,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, but he gave no reply.

Another bolt of lightning, and I saw him lying on his back, on a carpet, dressed in a dark kurta. He wasn’t listening to me.

I stepped closer, irritation rising. “Rudra, I am talking to you,” I said, louder now.

“Nandani, I’m not talking to you,” he shot back with the same edge. *God, his tantrums!*

I bit my lower lip, knelt beside him, and hit his midriff lightly with a clenched fist, frustrated. “What do you mean, you're not talking to me? I’m your wife. You will talk to me whenever I want,” I insisted.

He moved my hand away. “Don’t touch me. You’ve already crossed your limit,” he said sharply, and my anger surged.

“What do you mean 'don’t touch me'? You touch me all the time—you kiss me, you have sex with me—and now you say not to touch you? You’re bipolar,” I snapped, and touched him again.

Suddenly, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me beneath him.

A shiver shot down my spine. My angry eyes met his, and his hand gripped tightly around my wrist, making my stomach twist.

“Rudra,” I said, my voice lowering. My tone had shifted from lioness to kitten in a second.

“Leave me, Rudra,” I exclaimed, but his grip tightened.

“You don’t care what I say,” he murmured, voice hoarse.

“And you don’t care what I feel,” I threw back.

Silence settled between us, thick and heavy. Raindrops still poured down, and the wind sent chills racing across my skin.

“Rudra, I think we sh—”

He crashed his lips against mine with sudden, urgent force, making my heart race wildly, my words muffled in his mouth. It wasn’t gentle. It was raw. Intense. Dangerous.

“Shut up,” he muttered. He shifted above me, pinning both my hands above my head with one hand.

I moaned into his mouth as his free hand moved down my body. I instinctively lifted one knee, and he took advantage, slipping his leg between mine.

The rain grew heavier, the winds colder.

His lips moved to my jaw, and my head tilted back in response. Fear and excitement surged through me when his fingers touched my thighs and moved upward between my legs. My breath hitched. I bit my lip, squeezing my eyes shut, heart pounding wildly.

Another bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. “Rudra,” I gasped.

“Hnn-hnnn,” he hummed, sending vibrations through me.

The rain intensified, soaking us completely. My teeth chattered from the cold, and I tried pushing him slightly.

Suddenly, he bit my neck, making me gasp and shiver violently. My head fell back as the feel of his fingers slipping inside me crossed my mind.

I moaned softly as his lips descended to my chest.

“Next time you hit me, I’ll rip your clothes off and make you walk naked back to the chamber,” he growled. His words sent a sharp thrill through my core.

“Are you challenging me?” I asked in a breathless, shaken voice.

“You can try,” he muttered, and his fingers slipped into my core, thrusting slowly. I moved in sync with him, the sensation making my entire body tense and coil.

Rain hit my face in strong, cold droplets, and I was wet, through and through.

I took a deep breath and reached up, slapping his cheek lightly.

He inhaled sharply and straightened up, hands sliding over my chest. Before I could react, he tore my blouse, baring my breasts.

A shock ran through me. “Rudra!” I gasped.

I looked around in panic, trying to see if anyone was nearby, but the pitch-black darkness made everything invisible and scarier.

He pinned both my elbows down and took my nipple into his mouth. My body arched involuntarily. He released one of my hands, only to hike up my skirt.

“Rudra, someone might see!” I protested. Before I could finish, he straightened, grabbed my waist, and turned me onto my stomach.

“You deserve punishment,” he said lowly, pulling his kurta off.

“Are you mad? This isn’t our chamber,” I said, panicking as I felt him removing my blouse entirely.

Rainwater hit my bare back, and his palm pressed me down. “Calm down, Nandani,” he said in a hushed voice.

I closed my eyes. It wasn’t him who scared me; it was the environment—the darkness, the exposure, the risk.

His hand slipped to the hem of my skirt and slowly pulled it down.

I felt utterly timid, completely naked under the rain and on the terrace in the middle of the night. What if someone walks up? Well, this wasn’t even on the list of my wildest dreams.

He cupped my hip, his breath hot on my skin as he bit me softly.

I moaned, fisting my hand on the soaked carpet. It was pouring heavily.

He widened my legs apart, and I buried my face low when he hovered over, his hardness brushing against me. Adjusting my legs even wider, he slowly pushed in from behind.

And a loud cry escaped my lips; I bit down to suppress it.

He filled me completely, and slowly, I lifted my face, propping myself up on my elbows. His hand cupped the back of my neck, angling my head back.

It was insanely sensual as he thrust into me, his lips brushing against mine, and my midriff stretched with tension, adding a sharp edge to everything.

“Good,” he muttered, then placed both palms on either side of my shoulders.

My eyes shut tight with the growing intensity, the way he caged me under his body.

His hips began to move faster, and I felt like I was going to explode, crying and moaning from the knot building inside me.

Loud moans escaped me, but the sound of heavy rain drowned out my voice.

Suddenly, he knelt, grabbed my waist, and pulled me back until I shifted onto all fours. He thrust into me at such a wild pace my brain stopped processing. I was about to collapse until the release washed over us.

He wrapped his arms around my restless, tired self, pulling me to him. The rain had slowed down, and the cold air filled my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

I had already slipped on my wet skirt and wrapped my dupatta around my chest.

“You said you’d make me walk back to the chamber naked if I slapped you,” I giggled, teasing him.

He inhaled deeply and bit my cheek. “Yes. You are naked... only metaphorically,” he said, making me chuckle more.

I pressed my face into his chest as he carried me back to the chamber. “Not the bed,” I warned as soon as we entered. “It’ll get wet because of us,” I said, and he

set me down.

He disappeared into the dressing room and returned with a towel, tossing it at me.

“You didn’t really care about Maasimaa. You just wanted a topic for a fight. I guess the last few days seemed to bore you,” he said. Slipping his lower garment off, he wrapped a towel around his waist.

I inhaled deeply. It was partially true, partially false.

Well, I had wanted him to tell me before I had to drag it out of him.

And besides, there was no point in fighting anymore—the person was already gone.

I didn’t respond and walked toward my trunk.

“I’m sorry, Nandani. I should’ve told you earlier,” he said, his voice soft. I turned to him as he continued. “But, you see, I wanted to give her the chance she deserved. But she clearly said—her or you, and it was obviously you. So that triggered me to an extent, her demise didn’t even bother me. Maybe rage took over me, but as time passed, I realised I’d lost her. And that... made me feel guilty,” he said, walking toward me.

I untied the knot of my lehenga and pushed it low. I caught him watching me closely as I took the dupatta off my chest.

“I understand. That’s why I wanted to know. Sometimes, the hate overpowers us so much that we forget the decisions we’re making,” I said slowly, remembering the time I decided to marry his uncle.

I slipped into my nightwear and reached for my braid.

“Let me help,” he offered, coming closer. Gently holding my braid, he undid it slowly.

Breaking the silence, I said, “I’m sorry, I got angry. I think the responsibilities, the workload, and everything happening have been exhausting and stressful for a while now. I needed a break to recharge—and nothing works better than a fight,” I chuckled at the end, and he laughed too.

“Buckle up, Ranisa. The responsibilities are about to double,” he said.

I furrowed my brows. “What do you mean?”

He smiled and gently kissed my forehead. ***“Aapke bade Devarsa ke vivaah ki tithi nikat aa rahi hai,”*** (Your elder brother-in-law's wedding is approaching.) he said.

I gasped. “Oh yes! I almost forgot. Only two months left—Oh my God!” I squealed with excitement, my eyes wide. He chuckled at my reaction.

“Oh my God, there's so much to do! The jewellery, the clothes, the decorations, the invitations—everything! OH MY GOD!”

A wave of stress and excitement hit me simultaneously as I imagined the grand wedding ahead.

“For now, you must sleep,” he said, pulling me from my little whirlwind of thoughts and lifting me into his arms.

“You ruined my sleep,” I complained playfully.

He laughed, setting me gently on the bed. As he lay beside me, I tucked myself into his embrace, already lost in dreams of dances, celebrations, and all the magic the wedding would bring.

Things got even smoother between us. Rudra and I hadn’t had any major fights since then, but that didn’t mean it was all peaceful. Our sweet and spicy little arguments still popped up now and then. Sometimes they were political, sometimes personal, and many times just because he got too caught up in kingdom matters and forgot to eat or sleep.

Reconstruction work on the outskirts and other royal projects consumed most of our time. I had also begun working on women’s empowerment initiatives. A majority of the workforce in the palace now included volunteers and hired workers. Some old rules were revised, and newer, more flexible ones were introduced.

Meanwhile, invitations for Devarsa’s wedding had already begun going out, and we were just three days away from the big day. The entire kingdom was glowing like a bride. Ranaji seemed especially happy about it—maybe even more than he had been at our wedding. It felt like he was fulfilling all the joys he had missed back then, through his brother's celebration.

I was getting ready for the Haldi ceremony when a sudden knock echoed on the door.

“Come in,” I said, turning toward the dressing room door.

It creaked open, and Rudra walked in.

“Ab samay mila hai aapko apni patni se milne ka, Ranaji?” (So now you finally have time to visit your wife, Ranaji?) I teased.

He looked ridiculously handsome in a yellow kurta, his fingers raking through his hair as he walked toward me.

“I think I’m freaking out,” he confessed.

I inhaled deeply, sensing his tension. “What happened?”

I took his hand and led him to sit on the chair.

“The workers aren’t cooperating. The guests are on their way, and people are making careless mistakes. I want everything to be perfect, but they’re driving me insa—”

“Shhh…” I hushed him softly, watching him take a calming breath.

“It’s alright. It’s the first wedding of its kind. They're doing their best, just breathe,”

He looked at me with stressed, frustrated eyes, but gradually his expression softened.

“You look beautiful, little sunflower,” he murmured.

I chuckled. “Sunflower?”

He smiled and leaned in, placing a gentle kiss on my lips. “Hmm-hmm,”

I playfully tugged at his lower lip with my teeth. “I think you should stop calling me ‘little.’”

He raised a brow. “Why?” Wrapping his arms around my waist, he pulled me closer.

“If we have babies someday, I doubt they’ll want their mother being called little,” I said with a smile.

He chuckled. “Babies? How many are you thinking of?”

A blush warmed my cheeks. “I don’t know…”

He kissed me again, a little longer this time. “No matter how many kids we have, no matter how old you grow, how big you get… you’ll always be my little wife,”

I pulled back and narrowed my eyes. “That’s not fair.” I pouted.

Another knock broke our moment, and Rudra called out, “Yes?”

“Ranaji, everyone is waiting for you and Ranisa,” an attendant announced from behind the door.

I smiled. “Let’s go,” I said. But before I could move, he pulled me into another kiss, deeper this time, leaving me breathless.

“Don’t you dare distract me,” he warned, smirking.

I laughed. “I don’t do anything. I just breathe, and you get turned on,”

His eyes locked onto mine. “See? You’re already doing it,”

I pushed him away with a laugh. “We’d better walk out.”

He took my hand as we walked out of the chamber and into the open area, where preparations for Devarsa’s Haldi and Mehndi were in full swing.

Devarsa sat shirtless on a small stool, surrounded by women mixing haldi and sandalwood paste, singing and dancing. The whole place buzzed with life.

Rudra walked ahead and sat beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. I smiled at the sight of them laughing and talking.

“Bhabhisa!” Agastya’s voice rang out, and I turned to see him walking toward me in his bright yellow kurta, looking radiant as ever.

“Let’s dance!” he said with a playful grin, signalling the musicians to turn up their beats.

The sound of dholaks, anklet bells, and flutes filled the air, and I couldn’t help but twirl and jump along with the rhythm. The other women joined in, spinning in sync with the beats of Ghoomar[48]. My anklets jingled, my bangles clinked, and the whole environment vibrated with energy.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Rudra watching me. Agastya ran up to him, whispered something, and then shoved him gently toward me.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, I forgot we were surrounded by people and in the middle of a celebration. Rudra raised one brow, and I felt a shiver run down my

spine. My spinning slowed as he reached me, catching my wrist and making me spin again. I fell right back into the rhythm of the music.

He moved clumsily at first, trying to mimic the dance, which only made me giggle. Laughter erupted all around us.

Then I spotted Ranvijay sitting quietly. I grabbed Rudra's hand and pulled him with me. We walked to him, and I knelt.

Scooping haldi paste onto my fingers, I gently applied it to his cheeks. He smiled, turning his eyes down.

"Thank you, Bhabhisa," he said softly.

Rudra came forward with a mischievous grin. And instead of applying the paste, he smeared it all over Ranvijay's face.

"Bhaisa!" Ranvijay yelled, spewing the paste off his lips, and Rudra burst out laughing.

I turned to see Agastya laughing too, holding his stomach, and before he could escape, Rudra grabbed him by the neck and did the same to him.

"Now laugh like that again!" Rudra teased.

Agastya tried to protest, but it only made us all laugh harder. Just as I caught my breath, I saw Rudra approaching me, hands full of haldi.

I took a step back. "I swear, I'll kill you if you try that on me!"

I tried to warn him, but he only smiled, amused by my empty threats. As his pace quickened, I squealed and broke into a run.

"Rudra!" I screamed, trying to escape him.

The jingling of my anklets echoed through the corridors as I darted through the crowd and reached the quieter galleries. I turned to glance at him and shook my head frantically.

"No! I'll have to take a bath if you do this!" I pleaded, trying to reason, but he wasn't listening. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and I knew I had to hide.

I rushed toward our chamber, hoping to find a way to trick him. But the Stupid anklets—they betrayed every step I took.

Then, a plan struck me.

The chamber had circular hallways—one entrance from the left and an exit from the right. All the connected rooms led into it. If I entered from the left and kept moving fast enough, I could loop back around and sneak behind him.

I kept running, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. My breath came in short gasps, and my chest rose and fell rapidly with every step. I barely had time to marvel at how fast I was moving when—

Fingers closed around my wrist and yanked me back with a swift pull. A breath escaped my lips as he spun me around and pressed me gently against the wall.

I gasped, heart pounding, and he looked down at me with that maddeningly soft smirk.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

◆ Rudra ◆

My eyes were locked on hers. Her smile slowly faded, replaced by the rapid rhythm of her heartbeat, or perhaps it was the silent conversation our eyes shared in that moment.

"Rudra," she breathed, followed by a soft giggle.

I smiled faintly and stepped closer, caging her perfectly against me. Her gaze fluttered briefly before surrendering to the warmth of my touch, her face tilting gently into my palm.

With careful fingers, I applied the paste to her cheeks.

She opened her eyes, looking up at me with a soft smile. "You're far too stubborn, Rudra," she whispered.

I didn't reply, just watched her quietly.

I felt her hands press lightly against my chest as she shifted onto her toes. I slipped an arm around her waist and drew her even closer.

The energy between us shifted as she leaned in, and I gave in to the sensation of her lips meeting mine. At first, our kiss was slow, steady, savouring each other, but with each passing moment, the pace deepened, turning urgent and consuming.

I pulled her tighter against me. Her back met the wall with a soft thud, and she moaned into my mouth.

The sound lit a fire under my skin, rippling through me, tightening in my core until I felt myself harden in response.

My hand moved downward, brushing over her calf as I gently gathered her lehenga, all while our lips moved with growing hunger in a quiet, desperate passion.

The gallery around us was dim and silent, cloaked in shadows. Every slight movement echoed faintly in the stillness, adding to the thrill. Hence, we had to be quick.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me closer, and I felt one of her hands slipping between us. I paused, just enough to meet her eyes. Her cheeks flushed, and anticipation glistened in her gaze. She bit her lower lip, a quiet invitation, as her fingers moved to undo my lower garment.

When her hand wrapped around my erection and began to stroke gently, the soft clinking of her bangles broke the heavy silence between us. I couldn't hold back, and I captured her lips again, kissing her with rising urgency.

Every muscle in my body was tightening, aching for release, yet she teased, drawing out the tension between us. In a few hurried, breathless moments, we adjusted our clothes just enough, and I slowly pushed into her.

Her moan was low, restrained, her body arching as she tried to keep quiet.

As the tip eased into her, a sharp gasp escaped both of us, but I couldn’t hold back. I thrust in with a firm pull.

And she cried out, her body trembling against mine. I froze for a moment, looking into her eyes as they glimmered with unshed tears gathered at the corners, and I bit my lip, holding still, letting her adjust to me. Those few seconds dragged like a storm waiting to break.

Then she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine in a deep, desperate kiss.

I began to move, slowly at first, our hips grinding against each other in sync. Her moans grew louder, breathless, and raw. I felt her hot breath against my ear, her fingers clutching at the back of my head, her body arching into mine with each thrust.

The faint jingling of her anklet bells echoed through the empty corridor, merging with the rhythmic sound of our bodies. My thrusts grew deeper, faster, and she bounced against me, barely able to keep still.

Her moans were rising, and so I captured her lips again, muffling the sound, losing myself in her taste, her heat.

My body trembled as the tension finally gave way to release, and in that exact moment, she shuddered against me. Her sharp intake of breath, her body tightening, everything made the sensation hit even harder.

She breathed out, soft and shaky, as I slowly lowered her back onto her feet.

Her legs wobbled beneath her, and she let out a small laugh, making me chuckle.

She playfully slapped my chest and smoothed her lehenga back down, adjusting her clothes. Her dupatta had slipped to the floor, and her hair was wild and tousled, but she looked beautiful, radiant.

I tucked myself back in and leaned against the wall, breathing deeply to calm the fire still buzzing through my veins. “Are you okay?” I asked, glancing at her.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “Are you?”

I chuckled. “What’s going to happen to me?”

She laughed softly, and I stepped closer, wrapping my arms around her in a gentle embrace. I kissed her forehead, holding her close until her breathing steadied again.

“I have to go,” she murmured after a moment.

I exhaled deeply and nodded. “Okay.”

Nudging me away, she gave me one last look and walked back toward the chamber. I turned to the nearby pot and washed my hands, letting the cool water help ground me again.

I had to look after the preparations and everything. The rest of the day was spent meeting with guests and finalising arrangements. Only one day remained until Ranvijay's wedding.

After overseeing the preparations, I decided to visit him. I stepped into his chamber and found him sitting on the couch with a book in his hand, like always. I cleared my throat, and he looked up.

“Bhaisa,” he greeted with a warm smile, standing up.

I returned the smile and asked, “How are you?”

He sat beside me and replied, “I’m good,”

“I hope you're not freaking out about the wedding?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Why would I? No one is letting me do anything. Feels like a holiday,” I laughed at his reply.

His face glowed from the haldi, and a faint stain of mehendi marked his hands.

I smiled, saying, “Aishwarya is going to be a lucky girl,”

He blinked, giving me a soft but lazy smile. “I don’t know, Bhaisa. With all the responsibilities and work, I worry I won't be able to give her the time she deserves,”

“Don’t worry, you’ll manage. I know you will,” I reassured.

He nodded, then added, “I’m just unsure. I don’t know her. What if she doesn’t like it here? Or me? I don’t know her. What would she be like? Her father placed so many conditions—I didn’t even get to meet her,”

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “She might be feeling the same, maybe even more scared. She didn’t get a chance to know you either. She, too, might not know what you expect,” I said, and he looked at me, worry clouding his features.

“What if it doesn’t work out?” he asked, his voice layered with distress.

“You have half the kingdom's ladies falling for you, and you're scared she won’t like you? Impossible,” I said with a grin. “Once she gets to know you, she’ll fall in love. But no matter how she is—remember, she’ll be the only one for you,”

He nodded. “I know, Bhaisa,”

I smirked, “Still, I feel a little bad for her already,”

“Why?” he asked, frowning at my statement.

“Because you'll either give your free time to her, or your books,”

He smiled. “I'm worried about that too,”

“Bhaisa,” Agastya’s voice interrupted us. We looked up to find him walking in, tired but relaxed. He had been helping Nandani manage the guests and preparations.

“Come, Agastya,” I said, shifting to make space on the couch. He sat down, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “So, how’s everything going?” I asked.

“Very well,” he replied.

“All set for the wedding?”

He nodded and looked at Ranvijay. “Yes. All set to welcome our new Bhabhisa,”

Ranvijay gave him a pointed look. “Don’t you dare tease her like you tease Bhabhisa,”

“I won’t. But I can’t guarantee she won’t enjoy being teased by me,” Agastya smirked.

Ranvijay gritted his teeth, and I laughed. “Possessive much, already,”

Agastya added, “I gathered a little information about her,”

“Like what?” Ranvijay asked, curious.

“She’s just nineteen and speaks very little. I heard it from her former attendant,”

I inhaled deeply. “No matter what, her father’s actions weren’t right,”

Ranvijay nodded. “No one deserves that. I still don’t understand what drove him to such a decision, wanting to wed his daughter off to me,”

“Maybe something’s wrong with her?” Agastya suggested.

Ranvijay shook his head. “Even if there is, she’s still human. Nothing justifies what he did,”

I looked at him seriously. “You can back out if you’re not comfortable,”

“No, Bhaisa. I want to marry her. Her father tried to sell her—imagine the life she’s had. If I walk away now, she’ll be ruined. I can’t do that. If I can save her, I will,”

I nodded slowly. “Very well. But what about love?”

“I will love her,” he said firmly.

Agastya grinned. “Awww, how romantic, Bhaisa!”

We laughed together and spent the rest of the evening talking. After bidding them good night, I returned to my chamber.

I found Nandani seated on the couch, blowing air on her henna-stained hands. She looked up at me and smiled.

“Is he alright?” she asked.

I nodded. “Not really, but he’s trying to hide it,” I sat beside her and glanced at her mehendi. “It’s beautiful,”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. She asked me to help remove her jewellery, and I gladly did so.

The palace bustled with people even late at night, and the staff was up early the next morning. Her family arrived for the wedding.

“Pranaam, Baapusa,” she greeted her father warmly.

I joined my hands to greet him as well. “Pranaam, Rajaji,”

“What is this 'Rajaji'?” Daadisa interrupted. “Call him Baapusa, like Nandani does, Jawaaisa,”

I smiled a little, feeling shy. “Ji, Daadisa,”

Turning to him again, a little hesitant, I spoke softly, “Pranaam, Baapusa,”

He smiled and pulled me in for a hug. Though his embrace was warm, I noticed he didn’t seem as healthy as before.

“Are you alright? Your health—?” I asked.

He smiled, brushing it off. “Absolutely fine,”

I nodded. “Welcome.”

The day buzzed with excitement and celebration. Nandani managed the guests with grace and hospitality. I stayed busy with last-minute arrangements—we had to depart early the next morning.

That night, we barely slept. The sangeet[49] continued late into the night. Agastya and I made Ranvijay dance, though he was visibly nervous.

Finally, the day of his wedding arrived.

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Nandani

We woke up early after barely getting any sleep. The morning rituals had already begun, and I didn't find Rudra beside me when I woke. He must have been busy with the preparations for the Baaraat's[50] departure.

I dove straight into the thousand tasks that awaited me—the sweets, breakfast for the guests, the rituals, and, most importantly, getting the groom ready.

I asked Suman to bring out the clothes Rudra and I had picked for Devarsa—the jewellery, accessories, everything. I arranged them neatly on a large plate and signalled an attendant to follow me.

As I stepped into Devarsa's chamber, I saw him seated quietly on the couch while a few attendants moved briskly around. His expression was unreadable, but the frustration in his eyes didn't escape me.

"Is it too much, Devarsa?" I asked gently.

He turned toward me and immediately stood up. "Pranam, Bhabhisa," he greeted with a polite bow, and I gave him a soft nod.

Though older than me, he always treated me with respect, like an elder sister. I couldn't say the same about Agastya, who saw me as more of a friend than a sister-in-law—he only called me Bhabhisa in formality.

I sensed how awkward Devarsa still felt around women. I smiled lightly and addressed the attendants. "Please leave us."

They quietly filed out of the room. I turned to the attendant who had come with me and motioned for her to place the plates on the table.

"Time to get ready," I said.

"I've already bathed," he replied softly.

"Then change into this white kurta," I said, handing him the outfit.

"Okay," he murmured, taking the clothes and entering his dressing room. I waited until he returned, dressed and standing still before me.

"Done, Bhabhisa," he said.

I smiled. "You're looking very handsome, Devarsa," he smiled timidly, and looked down. I gestured him toward the dressing table, and he sat silently.

When he began putting on the rings and a thick bangle, taking them from the jewellery plate placed beside him, I immediately intervened, "Wear the overcoat first,"

Another attendant stepped forward with the heavy, jewelled overcoat.

"Ji," he replied, glancing at the last attendant.

I could see he was nervous and uncomfortable. I turned to her and said, "Leave the rest here. We'll manage."

He slid his arms through the sleeves and sat again.

Once alone, I looked at him and asked softly, “Are you still unsure, Devarsa?”

He lowered his gaze and nodded faintly. “Not unsure, Bhabhisa. Just… worried,”

I grabbed the heavy kanttha[51] and stepped closer to fasten it around his neck. “Why are you worried?” I asked quietly.

He inhaled deeply. “She doesn’t know me. I’m afraid—what if she doesn’t like me? What will our life even look like?”

His voice held hesitation, and I sensed how heavily this uncertainty pressed on him.

I smiled gently and placed my hand on his shoulder.

“Devarsa, aapna humaare bhai jaise hain, bade bhai. Aap bahut samajhdaar hai, saksham hai, tab bhi ek ladki hone ke naate aapse ek baat awashya kahenge hum. Ek kanya apna sab kuch chodkar apne var ke saath apne sasural aa jaati hai. Pratidaan mein maatra sammaan, thoda sa prem, aur kuch mann ke baatein ki hi apeksha karti hai aur usi mein apni saari prasannatayein dhundh leti hai. Aishwarya ko hum bhi nahi jaante, wo bhi humein nahi jaanti kintu yadi hum prayatn karenge use apnapan dene ki to wo apneaap humaari ho jaayegi. Parantu us prayaas ka praarambh aapko karna hoga. Uske hruday tak pahunchne ka maarg aapko swayam bana hoga, aur kisi bhi stree ke hruday tak pahunchne ka aadhaar sammaan hota hai jiski wo aadhikaarik hoti hai. Phir dekhiyega wo kaise aapki ho jaayegi,” (Devarsa, you are like my brother—an elder brother. You are very understanding and capable, despite that, as a woman, there is something I must say to you. A girl leaves behind everything to come to her husband’s home. In return, she expects only a little respect, some love, and a few heartfelt conversations—and in that, she finds all her happiness. We do not know Aishwarya, and she doesn't know us either. But if we try to make her feel a sense of belonging, she will naturally become ours. However, that effort must begin with you. You will have to carve the path to her heart yourself, and the foundation of reaching any woman’s heart is the respect she rightfully deserves. Then you’ll see how she becomes yours.)

He nodded quietly, eyes soft with understanding. We stayed silent for a while as he finished dressing.

“Are you ready?” Rudra’s familiar voice made us both turn.

He stepped in with a smile, and Devarsa stood up. “Ji, Bhaisa,” he said.

Rudra placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him into a hug. “I’m so happy for you, Ranvijay. Somehow, this feels even more special than my wedding,”

I chuckled softly, feeling a strange lump in my throat.

“His kohl is still left,” I said, noticing his bare eyelids.

“Oh,” Rudra murmured.

Ranvijay sat back down, and I grabbed the small silver kohl container. I dipped my index finger in and stepped forward.

"Devarsa, ye neg hai humaara," (Devarsa, this is my ceremonial gift.) I said with a mock sternness.

He chuckled, and Rudra warned playfully, "Stay still, or she'll end up poking your eye,"

I rolled my eyes and pulled back my hand for a moment. "Shut up, Rudra."

Devarsa laughed and adjusted himself. "Okay, I'm still now,"

Just then, Agastya's voice echoed in the room. "Are you ready?"

"Now you are disturbing me!" Devarsa said, laughing. I smiled and gently applied the kohl to his lower eyelid as he closed his eyes.

"You're looking very handsome, Bhaisa. Honestly, hot," Agastya added suddenly, making us all laugh again.

I shot Devarsa a look. He controlled his smile as I finished applying the kohl.

"Thank you, Bhabhisa," he said with a soft smile.

I held out my palm playfully. "No, no. Thank you. I want a gift,"

He chuckled. "Yes, yes. We'll give you a gift,"

I gave him a playful slap on the shoulder, chuckling, "I'll tell her you called her a gift,"

He smiled and stood up from the chair. "No need; I think I have something for you," he said, walking toward his almirah. I waited until he returned with a book in his hand.

"This is for you." He held it out, and I took it with a smile.

"Thank you so much." I placed it on the table, and just then, Agastya stepped forward and plopped down in the chair.

"Me too, Bhabhisa." I chuckled and shook my head.

"But it's not your wedding."

"So what?" he shot back immediately.

I sighed and extended my index finger to apply kohl to his eyes, too. "Thank you, but I'll give you a gift when you do the same at my wedding," he said, rising from the chair. I laughed softly.

"You'll have two Bhabhisas to do that for you, Devarsa," I teased, glancing at Rudra, who was watching me intently.

"Aap bhi lagwa lijiye, Ranaji." (You should get it too, Ranaji.) I said gently.

He smiled and stepped forward, settling into the chair. "As you suggest, Ranisa," he replied with a soft smile. "Just a little, Nandani," he murmured, and I couldn't help but smile back.

He looked irresistibly handsome in white—an impossibly hot, regal king. I applied the kohl to his eyes and then leaned back. Gathering more on my finger, I applied a small dot behind his ear.

"This will protect you all from the evil eyes," I did the same for Devarsa and Agastya.

“You should get ready now; we’re all set to leave,” Rudra said, and I looked at him.

“Someone should stay behind to welcome the bride, too,” I replied.

“I’ve spoken to Badimaa; she’s staying here at the palace,” he informed me.

I nodded. “All right then, I must get ready quickly,” I said, leaving the chamber and heading to mine.

I asked Suman to bring out a fresh pair of clothes. I chose the one my mother had gifted me.

I had met them the previous night. She told me Baapusa had been a little unwell after Holi, though he was better now. The news shook me, leaving me distressed.

Fighting with my parents, disagreeing with them, enduring tough moments, that was one thing. But hearing about their sickness? That was my worst nightmare. The thought of those who gave up all their comforts to raise us unconditionally, needing us now, was jarring. I couldn’t bear the idea of anything happening to them. My grandfather’s death devastated me. He loved me so deeply.

Why was I thinking about all this on such a beautiful occasion?

I quickly asked Suman to help me get ready.

I wore maroon attire and adorned myself with jewellery. I asked her to tie my hair into a bun. She draped the dupatta over my head. And before stepping out, I added vermilion to the parting of my hair.

The entire kingdom was bursting with joy. Trumpets, drums, and dancers filled the atmosphere with celebration.

I walked toward the gathering, where everyone was waiting for me. Rudra walked up to me, smiling. “You will surely catch the evil eye today,” he said, holding my hand and leading me to the centre of the crowd.

I looked around—everyone was watching us as the dancers made space. I giggled, and suddenly the drumbeats intensified. We lifted our steps and began dancing. I matched his rhythm, laughing freely, catching Agastya’s gaze across the crowd.

I signalled him in, and he joined. I pulled Daadisa and Maasa in, too. Daadisa danced with joy while Maasa hesitated shyly.

Even Badimaa and other relatives joined. The atmosphere was electric—everyone was lost in the moment.

I watched as Rudra and Agastya walked toward Ranvijay. They also pulled him into the dance, and he smiled and joined them.

I turned to the beautifully adorned elephant, ready for Ranvijay’s departure. I walked toward him, applied Tilak[52] to his forehead, fed him fruits, and gently stroked his head.

“Give blessings to Devarsa,” I whispered.

Rudra and Agastya helped Devarsa climb onto the elephant.

Cheers filled the air as he sat proudly, and I sprinkled rice and flowers in the air.

The priest blew the conch shell, marking the beginning of the departure. Everyone began settling onto their horses and into their palanquins.

I took my place in mine, and with great joy, our journey to Songarh began.

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EPILOGUE

The wedding was a total blast. Rudra was pleased as a brother, and it helped mend many ties between Suryagarh and other states.

We welcomed our bride with love, care, and the utmost respect. She seemed nervous, but I knew that once she truly understood Devarsa, she wouldn't be able to resist him.

Everyone felt drained after the celebration. I saw Rudra enter the chamber, exhaustion written all over his face. He wrapped his arms around me and buried his face in the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply.

“It felt surreal, Nandani,” he murmured.

“What?” I asked gently, reaching to unfasten his overcoat.

He smiled at me and spoke softly. “This. You and I, together as husband and wife... a happy family, and all these responsibilities as king and queen, all of it feels surreal. Just a year ago, I had nothing but the weight of my past and the burden of the future. And now? It feels freeing to know that the past holds no more power, and the future... It’s something we get to build together,”

I smiled and gently pushed him down into the chair. He pulled me into his lap, and I settled there comfortably. “Yes, Rudra. It’s like a dream. Can we even be happier than this?” I whispered.

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “I used to worry so much about my brother’s future. If I hadn’t become King, they might’ve ended up serving in courts of other states as mere workmen. But now, they have names of their own, a legacy. And I don’t want to be like my uncle—a tyrant feared more than respected. I want to be a king in the true sense, someone remembered with honour. I want to restore Suryagarh’s pride, its charisma and power, and pass that legacy to our children,”

I cupped his cheeks. “You will, Rudra. And we’ll do it together. We’ll fight every battle that comes our way—for our people and kingdom. And one day, we’ll raise a future king who’ll carry forward everything you build. Your efforts will never go in vain,”

He pulled me into a warm embrace. “Promise me, Nandani. Promise me you’ll always be by my side. That you’ll stop me if I ever stray, fight me if I’m wrong, and be the strength I lean on and the home I return to. Promise me you’ll always be bold, adorable, and my little seductress.”

I kissed his cheek. “Always, Rudra,” I said. “Since the day you first confessed your love—even if it wasn’t real, I’ve been all yours. I love you so much. I’m not sure if you truly understand this, but I’m obsessed with you. I know obsession is often a man’s domain, but I am completely. I feel like I was born for you. I never

knew the reason for my existence until I met you. Maybe it's to prove that a woman can fight for love, too. Or maybe... to give history another name to remember—a dangerous, burning love story. I am yours, Rudra. In every breath. In every inch of me. I have no shame in that,"

He leaned in and kissed me, slowly, lovingly, on the lips. "I love you, Nandani. So much. My little wife," he whispered against my lips.

I couldn't help but smile. "I know it took me time to realise what I felt for you, but sometimes, losing a battle helps you win your life,"

I chuckled softly. "Come on, let's sleep. It's late, and you're exhausted," I stood from his lap, but he grabbed my hand and looked at me, his eyes trailing down to my nightdress.

His fingers found the strings at my waist and tugged them loose. He pushed the overcoat aside and gently pressed me against the dressing table.

He lifted my legs and placed them on the armrests of his chair. My heart started racing as he raised my dress, parting my thighs.

Then he leaned in, and his mouth met my core with an intensity that made me gasp. My hips lifted, grinding with his tongue, moans tumbling uncontrollably from my lips, and my knees shook immensely.

"Rudra… what are you doing?" I barely managed, breathless.

He slid two fingers into me and curled them inside, making me flinch at his teasing. Suddenly, the tip of his finger hit a spot inside, and my body trembled violently. I couldn't hold myself. A loud cry escaped my lips as my knees gave out.

He gripped my thighs, striking the same spot, his rhythm relentless, until I shattered into pieces in his arms, collapsing to the floor with ragged breaths.

"I'm breaking my eighth promise, Nandani," he said softly, pulling me into his embrace.

I suddenly felt small in his arms, safe and weak and loved all at once. My head rested on his shoulder as I panted for breath.

"I'm giving myself to you. Entirely. As your husband, your king, your slave… your everything. I'm becoming your Rudra, Nandani. Only yours,"

I looked up into his eyes, breath still uneven. "And I've always been yours, Rudra. Even in my wildest dreams and darkest nightmares, you were the one to haunt me and heal me,"

We kissed slowly and deeply, lost in each other again. He lifted me into his arms and walked us to the bed with care and love.

That night, the rest of our lives awaited us.

By day, we were Ranaji and Ranisa—equal in duty, dignified in responsibility. But by night, we were just two lovers trying to escape the cage of the world and fly a little higher.

As the days passed and responsibilities grew heavier, our long talks shortened, shared meals were skipped, and quiet moments became rare.

But one thing never changed—the never-ending ache to chase each other across time and duty—the wait that made every union feel new again.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

AUTHOR’S WORD

People don’t create stories; Universal forces make them do. No matter how hard you try to break them, they always find a way back together. It’s as if they cannot exist without each other.

In their relationship, there’s no more and no less. They are equally mad, equally hungry, and equally passionate. And when the fire on both sides burns equally, that’s when the magic happens.

Rudra and Nandani are that magic.

Their love was fierce and powerful, unforgiving and dangerous. They had the power to destroy each other, and together, they held the power to destroy the world. They could have fought against each other, but they chose to fight together, against everything else.

Coming from completely different backgrounds and upbringings, they still managed to unite. Because they both put in the effort, when he fought against the world for her, she stood up for him. He came to protect her from herself when she was ready to self-destruct.

So many things were said, and still, they ended up together, because they gave weight to things based on what was deserved.

When Nandani made a Rudra for herself, Rudra made a Nandani for himself, too. Their compromises were equal, and their sacrifices were similar because their fire burned with the same intensity.

Their bold love survived because they treated each other as equals, one-half of each other, no more, no less. Simple. Rudra Nandani.

Even their names, when spoken together, sound like one.

Rudra Nandani

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

RUDRAJA ~ THE BATTLE OF BLOOD AND BLOOD

“Ranisa,” an attendant called out, and I looked at her, shocked. She was panting heavily.

“What happened?”

“Princess—Princess is…” She struggled to catch her breath.

“What happened to the Princess?” I asked in panic.

She pointed outside and said, “Princess and Hridaan are fighting again. They’re pulling each other’s hair.”

I inhaled a deep breath, filled with frustration. This five-year-old child of Rudra didn’t seem to know how to keep her hands to herself.

I marched outside and saw them screaming at each other and yanking each other’s hair.

“Princess!” I yelled, pulling her away from him. The attendant grabbed Hridaan on the other side.

“Stop it, both of you! Why do you two fight so much?” I scolded them, and she looked at me.

“Maasa, it’s all his fault! He said I wasn’t learning properly!” she complained, glaring at him.

“No, Choti Maasa, it’s her fault! I just asked a simple question, and when she couldn’t answer it, she started fighting with me!” he shouted.

“Liar!” she screamed.

“Stop it, both of you!” I shouted. “Say sorry to each other—right now,” I ordered firmly.

They both looked at me.

“No,” she said.

“No way,” he echoed.

“Come on, Princess—say sorry to your brother Hridaan,” I said, my voice laced with authority.

She gritted her teeth. “HE IS NOT MY BROTHER! I HATE HIM SO MUCHHHHHHHH! He is not my brother, and he can never be my brother!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Hridaan shouted back, his voice full of fury, “SHE’S NOT MY SISTER EITHER! I HATE HER SO MUCH! I’ll kill her someday, Choti Maasa!”

I took a long, deep breath, completely exasperated.

Time to call her father.

✦✦ ✧ ✦ ✦

Glossary

1. Daadi sa: Father’s mother, grandmother.
2. Lehenga: a traditional outfit consisting of a long, flowing skirt, a fitted blouse (choli), and a dupatta or scarf.
3. Dupatta: a long, unstitched scarf-like fabric worn by women, typically with traditional outfits like salwar kameez or lehengas.
4. Swayamwar: a marriage ceremony in ancient India where the bride chooses her husband from a group of suitors. It literally means ‘self-choice’ or ‘self-election’.
5. Maa sa: a respectful term used to refer to one’s mother or motherly figure.
6. Suryadev: Surya Dev is the Hindu Sun God, revered as the personification of the Sun. The name "Surya" means "Sun", and "Dev" means "God", so Surya Dev literally translates to "Sun God".
7. Yagya: a term that refers to a sacred Vedic ritual of offering and sacrifice, typically performed in front of a sacred fire (agni).
8. Baapu sa: a respectful and affectionate term that means "father" or "respected father". It is often used in royal or traditional settings to address one's father with reverence,

especially in noble or royal families.

9. Badi maasa: a term that translates to "elder mother", but its actual usage is more specific and cultural. It is often used to refer to Father’s elder brother’s wife. It is also used to refer to any elderly maternal figure.
10. Vaidya: "physician" or "doctor", traditionally referring to a practitioner of Ayurveda, the ancient system of medicine.
11. Kamarband: a traditional ornamental belt or waistband worn around the waist.
12. Kurta: a traditional garment. It is a loose, collarless tunic that typically reaches the knees or lower.
13. Gangaur: Gangaur is a traditional Hindu festival celebrated primarily in the Indian states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and parts of West Bengal, especially by women and girls. The word Gangaur is a combination of "Gana" (a name for Lord Shiva) and "Gauri" (another name for Goddess Parvati).
14. Pooja: an act of worship performed to honour and invoke the blessings of a deity.
15. Diya: Generally refers to a small oil lamp made from clay,
16. Buaa: refers to the father's sister, commonly known in English as an aunt.
17. Pranaam: a respectful greeting, salutation, or bow. It is

commonly used to show respect, especially to elders, teachers, or someone you hold in high esteem. The gesture often involves folding the hands together and slightly bowing the head.

18. Bhai sa: a respectful way to address an elder brother or a male person you regard with respect.

19. Aarti ki thaali: It is a decorated metal plate or tray used in religious rituals to hold items such as a small oil lamp (diya), incense sticks, flowers, rice, and other offerings during the ceremony called "Aarti."

20. Nanad: It means "sister-in-law," specifically the husband’s sister

21. Bhabhi sa: It means "sister-in-law," specifically referring to the wife of one's brother.

22. Phupha sa: Husband of one's paternal aunt

23. Maamujaan: a warm, affectionate way to address or refer to one’s maternal uncle.

24. Begum: It can refer to a noblewoman, queen, or a woman of royal or aristocratic descent.

25. Haldi: It’s a bright yellow spice commonly used in cooking. But as a part of the wedding rituals, a paste made from turmeric, often mixed with sandalwood, rose water, and other natural ingredients, is applied to the bride and groom’s skin.

26. Hookah: A hookah is a water pipe used for smoking flavoured tobacco, often called shisha.

27. Mehendi: Decorative designs are created on the skin using a paste made from the powdered, dried leaves of the henna plant. As a part of the wedding ritual, the ceremony of applying henna is also called as mehendi.

28. Tabla and dholak: one-headed and two-headed hand drums.

29. Abbujaan: an affectionate term used to address or refer to one's father.

30. Ranaji: It is a combination of "Rana" (meaning a king, warrior, or prince) and "ji" (a suffix used to show respect). "Respected King"

31. Mandap: It serves as the central focal point for Hindu weddings, often beautifully decorated with flowers, fabrics, and lights.

32. Pandit ji: A respectful title used in India for a learned scholar or priest, especially one who is an expert in Hindu scriptures, rituals, and religious ceremonies.

33. Saptapadi: The term literally means "seven steps". It refers to a traditional Hindu wedding ritual where the bride and groom take seven steps together around a sacred fire, each step representing a vow or promise they make to each other for their married life.

34. Mantra: A sacred word, phrase, or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation or prayer.
35. Ranisa: a respectful way to address a queen or a noble lady.
36. Dhoti: a long piece of cloth, usually white or cream-colored, wrapped around the waist and legs and tied at the waist, resembling loose pants or a skirt.
37. Gatte: The word "gatte" in Hindi generally means "dough balls" or "lumps of dough" made from gram flour (besan) or other flours, which are often boiled or cooked and used in Indian dishes like "Gatte ki Sabzi" — a popular Rajasthani curry.
38. Gurujii: It is often used to address or refer to someone who provides wisdom, guidance, or spiritual instruction.
39. Maa: mother.
40. Maasimaa: mother’s sister.
41. Devarsa: It means younger brother-in-law.
42. Jiji: a respectful and affectionate way to address an elder sister-in-law or sister.
43. Baisa: It is often used to address or refer to a princess, noblewoman, or a respected lady of high social standing.
44. Raaj mata: "Queen Mother" — the mother of the reigning king or prince in a royal family.
45. Nath: a traditional nose ring or nose ornament
46. Mahawar: A traditional ceremonial application of red

henna paste.

47. Hawan: A Hindu fire ritual or sacred fire ceremony performed to invoke divine blessings, purify the environment, and offer oblations to the gods through fire.

48. Ghoomar: It is a traditional folk dance from the Indian state of Rajasthan. Women usually perform it in flowing dresses and involve graceful, spinning movements done in a circular pattern.

49. Sangeet: A joyful pre-wedding event where both families come together for singing, dancing, and celebrating the upcoming marriage.

50. Baaraat: a festive procession of the groom and his family, friends, and guests as they travel to the bride’s home or wedding venue, typically accompanied by music, dancing, and celebration.

51. Kanttha: a neck ornament or necklace in literary or classical usage.

52. Tilak: a mark, often made with colored powder or paste, applied on the forehead in Hindu culture. It holds religious, cultural, and spiritual significance.

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BOOKS IN THE MHU UNIVERSE

First generation

1. **Abhishree ~ The Queen of Mahabaleshgarh**
2. **Bride of Sultan ~ The Bleeding Rose**

Second generation

3. **Ruhani ~ The language of love**
4. **Rudra Nandani ~ The saga of control and seduction**
5. **Aishwarya ~ The Prince's Brown Bride**
6. **Sumanika ~ The prince's Widowed Bride**
7. **Trishalini ~ The Jewel of Mahabaleshgarh**
8. **Haider's Ghazal ~ The Amir's Crushed Rose**

Extras

1. **The Commander's Wrath**

2. **Hrutvika ~ The Peshwa's Thick Bride**

Third generation

Books dedicated to the children of second-generation characters. Names will be announced in time on official pages.

BOOKS IN THE 'THE BILLIONAIRE'S SAGA' UNIVERSE

1. **The Billionaire's Secret**
2. **The Billionaire's Secretary**
3. **The Billionaire's Bully**

Thanks!

Namrata
Himani
Yash
Jyoti
Aditi
Akansha
Ananya
Disha
Doyel
Geetika
Jasleen
Jiya
Khushee
Naina
Neha
Praapti
Priyanshi
Ruhi
Saina
Samruddhi
Shagun
Shree
Shreya
Srushti
Tanya
Trina
Trisha
Shriti
Sejal
Aastha
Deepak
Sorry if I forgot any names; it would be unintentional.

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